



The AUTO BOYS CAMP

By
Jas. A. Braden



Joseph M. Casner,

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CHS 7129 A
Joseph M. Casner,

Joseph M. Casner,

No 48 -

To Joseph
From his Father



Safely the Thirty ran the fearful gauntlet.

(Page 387)

THE AUTO BOYS' CAMP

By JAMES A. BRADEN

AUTHOR OF

"THE AUTO BOYS," "THE AUTO BOYS' OUTING," "THE
AUTO BOYS' QUEST," "FAR PAST THE FRONTIER,"
"CONNECTICUT BOYS IN THE WESTERN
RESERVE," "THE TRAIL OF THE
SENECA," "CAPTIVES
THREE," ETC.

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THE AUTO BOYS' CAMP

CHAPTER I

THE OLD HOUSE ON THE POINT

Tiny waves seemed to murmur contentment as in gentle rhythm they flowed one close upon another to the beach of the woodland lake.

"But," observed Paul Jones, rather thoughtfully for him, "when they come to the shore and find they have to stop, they splash and bubble, making a regular fuss about it, peevish things!"

"Well! What's going to happen? Something, sure! Paul's getting poetical!" exclaimed Billy Worth.

"Huh! I don't call that poetical," came the retort. "Poetical means making up poetry.

Like, well, listen to this!" continued Paul, deftly casting hook and line into the water, far out from the old log whereon he had his seat. "Listen to this, now—

Here's the fishes' elevator,

Going up, up, up! Right away, right away!

Grab a hold there, Mr. Fish!

Diner service all the way!

Pretty good, don't you think? Made it up all myself, out in the boat today," Jones grinned.

"Talk about something going to happen! Goodness! I should think something *would* happen!" put in Dave MacLester, a little laugh taking the edge off his sarcasm.

"Why! You—" bristled Paul, "You don't know poetry from —" Whatever it was Jones meant to say was well intended, no doubt, to make stout defense of his attempted rhyme; but he abandoned the effort for Phil Way's tone was fairly serious, and so suddenly he interrupted:—

"Something no one suspected has happened *already*," said he. "There's smoke coming up from the old place on the Point," he added, rising to his knees and leaning forward over the narrow strip of beach.

The direction of Phil's gaze was toward a worn and weather-beaten house of considerable size nearly hidden among the trees a half mile distant across the bit of bay. The building was of logs surmounted by an upper half-story of pine lumber and a roof of faded green shingles. Where a wooded point projected a few rods from the mainland it stood, bleak and, so far as known, tenantless.

The fading daylight left the old house deep in the forest shadows but quite plainly, in the sunset glow above the tree tops, could be seen the thread of blue Phil mentioned.

Not the slightest breeze was stirring. From somewhere about the deserted building,—the boys could not make out a chimney—the smoke rose in a slender, unbroken column. And not

more quiet was it than the vast woods which lay in all directions, hushed and still in the gathering twilight.

For a few seconds none of the boys spoke. The little waves lapped the shore ever so gently,—not peevishly at all, as Paul had said—and no other sound broke the impressive silence.

“Nothing but smoke, though!” declared Mac-Lester suddenly, yet in an undertone.

“No—nothing but smoke!” said Phil Way in a solemn, puzzled manner as if he put his thoughts into words unconsciously. “I wish we had gone over to the Point and had a look about the old place today, as we planned to do,” he added. “Not that—”

Not finishing his sentence but slowly getting to his feet, Phil looked north and east and again west, scanning in each direction the lake's shore line. Save for that thin blue column, and just behind him their own camp and

its smoldering fire, no sign of any human being's presence could he discover.

And following Way's example, the other boys looked up and down each darkening line where the forest-skirted shore cast deep shadows on the water. Puzzled and more than puzzled were they, if one might judge by questioning glances and knitted brows.

"But then," said Paul Jones, at last, with that inimitable grin of his, "since Mac says it's 'nothing but smoke,' I move we take his word for it and adjourn to the festal board."

"Won't be much festal board to it if you fellows don't get some fish cleaned," declared Billy. "I'm not going to use up a lot of other grub stuff just because there are no fish ready, like we did this morning!"

Worth, it may be observed, was the absolute master in the commissary department and cook as well. His word was law. Such work as dressing the fish he might call upon others to perform; but when it came to frying a fine

mess of bass or perch he, and no one else, he considered, was equal to the position's fine requirements.

"Fishing's no good so close in shore anyway," declared Billy, further, reeling up his line. "Get those we caught in the boat, Paul. Clean up all we have, you and Dave. They'll only spoil if we don't use 'em. And if, seeing our smoke, somebody who may have just landed at the Point today should call around after while we'll have plenty to ask 'em to supper."

"I'll get a good fire for you, Bill. I'll get a lot of wood ready for night, too," said Phil Way, in that quiet manner of his. He climbed slowly up the low bank a few feet back from the beach as he spoke.

Dave had already put his tackle away and now Paul reluctantly did the same. It was always a hardship for him to leave off fishing. Even if he had no success at all he kept hoping that the next cast of his line would be more fortunate. Thus he was sure to be the last

to draw in his hook as he was usually first at dropping in. "You just had to chase Jones away from the water like driving cows out of a cornfield," Billy Worth often said.

With real liveliness of manner, though, Paul went at the task of dressing the day's catch when once his rod and his line were laid aside. Seated astride the old log, down near the water's edge, he and Dave made the scales fairly fly as they scraped and slashed and trimmed, putting the fish into a pan of cold water on the log between them as one after another was prepared for Chef Worth's superior skill.

"I'd a good bit rather not have seen that smoke," observed MacLester quite soberly. "It may not mean much but then again, it may. If they hadn't told us the old place was empty and had been so for years, I'd think less about it. We didn't *want* neighbors, that's the point! We wanted to be let alone!"

"Whoever's there must have come just to-

day, or not longer ago than yesterday," Paul answered. "Phil and I rowed quite near the Point this morning and I'd declare there was no one within shouting distance then. Why, you ought to see how tumble-down everything is! Where the boat-landing was, there's nothing now but the rotten posts in the water and maybe one or two old slabs still hanging to them. The path up to the porch is all washed out by the rain, and the brush is growing up almost between the logs piled there together to make the steps. No, sir! Whoever's there has just come, and I'll bet it's no one more than some fishing outfit that has steered in there, just looking for a likely place to stay all night. If they'll only mosey along in the morning—"

"Let me have what you've got ready," interrupted Worth, coming quickly down to the water's edge. "Takes twice as long to cook these big fish clear through as it does the small fry we get around home! And hurry along!

"We don't want to be eating supper 'way after dark!"

"Should say not! I'm so hollow now I rattle like stones in a can," declared Paul emphatically.

In a very few minutes more he and Dave had dressed the last fish and were washing their hands in the tiny waves, still musically flowing shoreward. This task completed, they delivered the fine mess of fish to Chef Billy who instantly ordered that at least half of them be put in cold water, covered over, and so kept for breakfast. Worth always managed to think of one more thing to be done before a meal was announced as all ready, Paul grumbled but he did as requested.

Phil had been piling up a large and most interestingly suggestive heap of good, dry firewood, but now he too was quite ready. The cheerful glow of the campfire lighted up the semi-darkness under the tall, old pines, the delicious scent of the frying fish gave a keener

zest to appetites already sharp, and Billy's "all hands on deck!" which came a moment later was as pleasant a summons, perhaps, as mortal ever heard.

Maybe there are more tempting menus than fried fish, potatoes fried, also, to a soft, white and brown consistency, coffee and bread and butter—maybe! More delicate fare and more elaborate service than tin dishes and a trunk turned on its side for a table can be imagined; yet not in the most brilliantly lighted palace with all its accompaniments of rich food, silver, and china, exquisite glass and fine linen would it be possible to enjoy any repast more completely than the Auto Boys enjoyed their supper here under the sheltering pines above the margin of the forest-hemmed lake.

Many a pleasant sally and many a mirthful laugh added to the enjoyment of the good, substantial camp fare. Conversation among the four friends rarely dragged on such occasions. Whatever was of interest to one was

of interest to all. But tonight there were moments when voices were unconsciously dropped to tones hushed and subdued.

The possibility of some deep significance lying back of the fact that the old house on the Point was evidently occupied suggested itself in many ways.

“It doesn’t stand to reason that anyone is hiding there. Whoever it might be would have seen us out on the lake and know we were in camp near by. Then, of course, they’d know we could see their smoke if they had a fire,” argued Billy Worth. But his manner flatly denied his belief in his own words. The very serious nodding of his head meant he really suspected that exactly what he said did *not* “stand to reason,” if it meant anything whatever.

“S’posin’ we’d gone over there today, I don’t think we’d have have found anything. Maybe some fellows coming up here from Staretta or some place, to fish, have moved in there. I

don't believe there has been someone there all along."

This from Paul was also a very hopeful expression, yet there accompanied his words a shade of doubt and uneasiness. Vaguely he seemed to hint that deep in his heart was a foreboding of something to follow the late afternoon's discovery.

Even MacLester's oft repeated, "Nothing but smoke" was not without a note of inquiry, as if what he would have said, had he expressed his real thoughts, would have been—"There's something *more* than smoke for us to think about."

Complete darkness had come ere the four chums finished supper. Their campfire lighted up the improvised table and shed its yellow glow well within the shelter of poles and brush a few feet farther back from the water. The August night was cool, as often they are in these upper portions of Michigan, and the

cheerful blaze gave genuine comfort as well as light.

Long the boys lingered over the last few drops of coffee the grimy but precious coffee pot afforded. Their conversation had drifted to fresh subjects. Phil told of the surprising knowledge of the ways of men, with hook and line, that fish have been known to display—a certain great bass being seen in the same haunts year after year, and always escaping capture,—and many similar things. They brought forth much comment and discussion.

Paul contended that fish must be much more knowing than many other creatures,—chickens, for instance; because a chicken will “nearly run its legs off” to get out of the way of an automobile, keeping squarely in the middle of the road, when it might so much more easily just go to one side and be out of danger at once.

To this Dave replied that chickens would know more, too, when they had had as long a time to learn that the automobiles aren't after

them, as fish have had to learn that they take a chance when they go fooling around a hook and line. He chuckled quietly, possibly thinking how very much like fish human beings may sometimes be.

What was that?

As if in company with Dave's half smothered laugh there came, but even still more audibly, a great, deep sigh. The sound was very near, almost within the brush shack, as nearly as any of the lads could judge. But when they went to look they saw no one—heard no one.

“Oh, I guess it wasn't anything—only the wind, anyway,” said Phil Way. But there again in his tone was that note of questioning and vague unrest that had marked every reference of the evening to the old house on the Point.

“Just some bird or something whirring by in the dark, and out over the lake,” suggested Paul Jones. He looked in that direction then, and the others followed as he strolled down to the

strip of beach. Together they bent their gaze toward the Point across the murmuring dark waters. All was black and silent.

Only as a denser shadow in the distance was the land's projection visible. No light could they discover, no sound of voices,—only the rippling waves, the low breathing of the breeze and darkness.

CHAPTER II

AN INTERESTING EVENING IN CAMP

It was the third day of the camp beside the woodland lake. It was their love of the open that, in the first place, had suggested to the four chums a long automobile journey; and their desire to visit and to explore some portion of the country not only new to them, but little frequented by others, had led them to this semi-wilderness.

Neighbors, barring the possibility of the abandoned home of a once prosperous but now nearly forgotten Fishing and Shooting Club,—the house on the Point,—being unexpectedly occupied, were very distant. Five or six miles away was the nearest clearing and its low, two or three-room frame house of unpainted pine boards. Still a dozen miles more distant was the nearest village,—the little town of Staretta.

Only a collection of small frame houses, a big sawmill or two, a church or two, a school and a few stores was Staretta. Stump-dotted clearings were its sole surroundings. Even in the main street the roots of great trees still made a series of very rough ribs where occasional ruts exposed them.

Pine stumps, with staples and rings, were the hitching posts in front of the stores and beside the church. In short, there was nothing pretty about the hamlet, its name alone, possibly, excepted; but the clean, pungent odor of fresh saw-dust hung constantly in the air and the strong men one met gave promise of a brighter blossoming in the wilderness at no very distant time.

The lake on whose southerly shore lay the boys' camp was more than ordinarily attractive. Some older and, no doubt, less enthusiastic persons would have said the water and its surroundings were ideal, were they only more easily accessible. To the four friends mere dif-

ficulty in reaching so desirable a place was not a considerable drawback.

“Exactly what we want to do is go where hardly anybody else goes,” the lads had agreed. And when they found the roads growing more and more like mere trails through the forests and long stretches of wild country, as their sturdy automobile went steadily northward, they were rather pleased than otherwise. They simply ran slowly, and with cheerful patience took whatever time they needed to reach each succeeding point upon their route.

But of the lake, the abandoned house upon the Point, and the camp, a glimpse of which the reader has already seen, there must needs be more extended descriptions later. Just now some detailed information concerning the quartette of young gentlemen whose names have been mentioned is essential to the making of their closer acquaintance.

For one should always know something of those of whom he may be expected to make

friends, and—well, there can be little doubt as to your having the most friendly feelings for Phil and Dave and Paul and Billy. If you are inclined otherwise, or believe you will not like them as the acquaintance progresses, then you may as well close the book right here.

Very human are all four of the lads—full of the frailties of human nature, but also full to the brim with lively spirits, courage, bright hopes, and a great big friendship for each other and for all the world. Their ages range from fourteen to sixteen years.

If, in the earlier stories of this series, you have already made the acquaintance of the Auto Boys, you will scarcely need be reminded that Phil Way is the oldest. Big-hearted, generous Phil! Calm and thoughtful,—a little too dignified, it may be, but tall and strong and as manly looking a chap, with the brownish hair brushed well back from his high forehead and his steady eyes looking straight into your own, as you would ever wish to see.

“Gee! I’m glad I *know* the dark won’t hurt me!”

This half-jocular, half-serious remark from Paul Jones, as the four friends looked into the gloom of the night and away toward the house on the Point, was fairly indicative of the speaker—a fun-loving, serio-comic chap. Paul is the youngest of the quartette. If you were to see his tousled, sandy hair, his freckled face and slight, wiry figure but most of all his expansive smile, you would certainly vote Jones a most likable lad.

And—“Well, just the same I knew we’d find a screw loose somewhere. We were getting on too comfortably for it to last,”—were words that typified Dave MacLester pretty well, as he followed Paul’s remark.

David was not very jovial as a rule. Too much was he given to looking on the dark side—a bad, bad habit; yet he was an unselfish, steady-going young fellow who won friends easily despite his slightly pessimistic disposition. Mac

was the heavy-weight of the quartette, though slightly younger than Phil.

Self-reliance was one of the good traits of Mr. William Worth, Jr. "Bill can do the trick," had been said of him many times and with reference to more things than camp cookery, and in that he was everywhere acknowledged a veritable champion. He had a way of thinking things out for himself, also, a great deal as Phil did.

He was far from being effeminate, even though he could bake a johnny-cake, or pluck and roast a chicken. Quite to the contrary, he was of "husky" stature, as Jones would have expressed it, and though not as tall, nor as old by almost a year, he weighed as much as Phil. His bright eyes, rosy cheeks and bright, clear skin made him quite a handsome fellow, but if anyone had called him "pretty"—But no one did. Perhaps they knew better.

"Now, say, fellows, seriously," declared Phil Way as the boys turned slowly toward the

campfire's friendly glow again,—“seriously, we're getting nervous without very much reason. One might think we'd never *slept out* before. We'll have a good old talk and then turn in. If anybody has anything new to say about that smoke, let him say it, but for pity's sake let's stop threshing it over and over.”

“I was just going to say that it's ‘nothing but smoke,’ ” observed Paul, and even by the fire-light the twinkle of his eyes could have been seen.

“I move that we get a book on taxidermy and study up before another trip like this,” put in Billy, abruptly. The change of subject was quite acceptable.

“Wouldn't it be fine to fix up our garage with a lot of stuffed things?” exclaimed Paul with enthusiasm. “That big bass Dave got yesterday,—wouldn't it look great on the wall right above our desk?”

A desk in a garage? Yes, even so. Because, you will remember, the Auto Boys had very

much more than the automobile to claim their attention. Their business as The Young American Contract Company was not forgotten even though the car did take a great deal of time which formerly they would have devoted to other enterprises.

They earned their own money for their vacation tours. True, they traveled inexpensively, but gasoline and other supplies mean a cash outlay every time. It was through the saving of their joint earnings, indeed, that they were enabled to make the initial payment on their automobile in the first place, it will be remembered.

There was the reward in the Binski case, too, about which I have told you in "The Auto Boys," that added very respectable proportions to their bank account. A part of this money they still had; for expenses were not allowed to go unchecked or to exceed for more than a week or two at a time the income of the friends.

Take the fun and adventures related in "The Auto Boys' Outing," for instance. The vaca-

tion was not costly because the old Beaman farmhouse was obtained rent free and provisions were inexpensive. Similarly, Camp Golden, of "The Auto Boys' Quest" more than defrayed the cost of that trip including the Gold Cup races and all.

These things are mentioned at some length because they will advance the new reader's knowledge of the four boys, but more especially because they help to a better understanding of MacLester's answer to Paul's suggestion about the big bass.

"Don't believe in tying up money in any such way," declared Dave. "What good is a dead, stuffed fish hanging up in anybody's garage? Bet you could get a grease gun for the same cost. That would be something worth having. Enough sight more appropriate to hang up in a garage, too!"

"Speaking of grease guns, by George! It just reminds me," exclaimed Billy Worth with sudden emphasis, "just reminds *me* that you

left the rifle over there where we shot at the mark, Jonesy! Somebody'll have to get it."

"Oh, blame it! And I was just settled comfortably, after sitting for half an hour on a sharp stone thinking it was only a fold in my blanket!" came a growl, though a good-natured one, in answer. Nevertheless, after several minutes of sober reflection Paul did arise, yawn tremendously and take his way toward the fallen log on which the small rifle had been placed and for the time forgotten.

The distance of this old log from camp was only a few hundred feet but in the darkness of the woods, made doubly dense to Paul by reason of his having sat for some time staring into the campfire, the lad could scarcely more than grope his way.

Dave called out to be careful about knocking any trees down, but his attempted witticism was greeted only with the scornful answer it deserved, "*Don't you worry! They'll fall the other way!*"

A little later Paul was heard growling softly to himself, evidently somewhat confused as to finding his way. Then suddenly his murmured tones were heard no more. No sound whatever, save the lapping of the tiny waves upon the beach and the sighing of the wind broke the forest's silence.

For a little time no one noticed the extreme quiet prevailing. It was only after several minutes had passed and Paul did not return that his extended absence attracted comment. He had had time to go to the old log—a giant of its kind long since uprooted and laid low—and to return again a number of times.

“Jones should have taken a light,” observed Phil, thoughtfully. Then,—“Oh, Paul! Hello!” he called out, inquiringly. There came no answer. The rippling water and sighing wind only intensified the exceeding quiet of the woods and darkness.

“Hush up! Jones is just playing some trick; trying to make us think he's lost, while all the

time he will be only slipping closer and closer up to hear us worrying and fretting about him. You see!" quickly suggested MacLester in undertones.

"Maybe; but it doesn't seem like Paul to do that, either," whispered Way after a few seconds' reflection.

"Suppose I slip through the back of the shack so's the darkness there won't let my leaving be noticed, and scout around a little. If Jones *is* creeping up to hear us wonder why he doesn't come, we'll have some fun," proposed Billy Worth a little later. "Blamed little Indian! He deserves it!"

"Best part of that idea is that we'll find out whether Paul *is* just trying to fool us. He might have knocked himself unconscious falling over a root or something, for all we know," answered Phil.

With a great stretching of himself and a yawn like the sound of a subdued but long drawn out bugle call, (all for Jones' benefit, in case he

should be watching from the outer darkness) Billy retired from the fireside. Slowly, too, as if he wearily dragged his way to bed, Worth ambled into the camp shelter, that side of the shack nearest the fire being entirely open. A half minute later Dave and Phil heard him crawl stealthily through an opening he made in the rear wall of the lodge, then all was still.

"I'll bet Billy has only his trouble for his pains," observed MacLester in an undertone, moodily poking the fire with a long stick he had been whittling.

Phil did not answer, but turned half around so that, by an effort, he could reach the pile of wood without rising, and thus slowly and quite laboriously he replenished the fire.

One might have supposed that his getting to his feet would have incurred some very serious penalty, and that it was for this reason that he labored with such effort to get the wood to the blaze.

But that would have been wrong. Phil was

tired—really very tired—and being a boy, too, he was apt to do things boy-fashion. And it is true that no one could rightfully accuse Way of being lazy. There is no doubt whatever, though, that many a young fellow has been charged with that offense who was in no manner guilty, and just because he chose to do a thing in the style which most appealed to his own personal convenience.

The flames shot higher and higher, licking up the old, dead pine as if it were some monster with a thousand tongues ravenously feeding upon the dry-as-dust wood. Expectantly the two boys left in camp strained their ears for some sound from the surrounding darkness. Eagerly they gazed into the wall of night beyond the campfire's farthest rays. But they heard nothing.

A quarter of an hour passed. Dave MacLester was growing weary. At any rate, "Oh, this sort of thing makes me tired," he said. "Let's

sing out to both of 'em to omit the foolishness," he proposed.

Before Phil had answered there came a rushing of hurried feet upon the ground and through the low undergrowth. Like a small whirlwind Billy Worth plunged into the circle of light, excited and gasping—

"There's something mighty mysterious at that old house over there," he ejaculated hastily. "Twice a light has appeared for just a second or so at an upstairs window. Jones saw it first and was watching to see it again, when I found him out there by the old log. We watched together and after a while it came and went again. Paul's over there in the woods keeping his eyes wide open and wants you both to come see! Come on!"

CHAPTER III

THE EMPTY CLUBHOUSE

“Fireflies are what you saw, and you can’t make me think otherwise,” Dave MacLester half laughed, half growled. Quickly he and Phil had returned with Billy to the spot where, beside the old log, Jones still kept watch of the house on the Point.

And although Paul answered defiantly, and Billy treated Dave’s comment with only slightly milder scorn, no further appearance of the mysterious light did the boys witness. They returned to camp at last, their curiosity very much excited and, if the whole truth be told, their nerves and courage not quite so well within control as usual.

“If we hadn’t been so head-over-heels taken up with the lake and the fishing we’d have found some interesting exploring right on land, before

now," observed Billy Worth thoughtfully as he prepared for bed.

"Don't see when we've had time. Building the shack took a whole day," protested Paul. "We'll peek around some tomorrow, all right," he added in significant tones. And then a moment later, though no one had replied, "Fireflies!" he fairly exploded,—“Fireflies! Might as well say I saw fire horses, fire engines, hook and ladder trucks and all!”

Each with his own thoughts, the four lads at last settled themselves on their beds of fragrant pine; but where Jones' thoughts ran were made apparent at least once more before he fell asleep. "Fireflies!" he ejaculated again. "I'll live on tin cans for the rest of my natural life, if that light was anything like a firefly!"

But Paul was in no danger of being confined to the extremely plain though very heroic diet he mentioned. However doubtful Dave may have been, and however puzzled was Phil Way, Billy as well as Paul, knew with positive cer-

tainty that the strange light they had seen was neither fireflies nor fancy.

Why did it appear so momentarily, then so quickly and so completely disappear? If it had remained burning, whether stationary or moving about, they would have thought less of it. If it had burned steadily as a lamp or a lantern, it would have been more easily understood. Like a flash of flame coming from nowhere but the darkness and as suddenly going—where?—it had appeared to them. That the light was at the old house, and upstairs, as they supposed, they fully believed. It was on this point alone that there could be any doubt in their minds.

To what extent the boys' sleep was disturbed by the unexpected developments of the evening it is not necessary, perhaps, to say. Life in camp was no new thing to them. Ordinarily they dozed off as serenely, and slumbered just as soundly, as if the walls of their own houses surrounded them and relatives and friends were within instant call.

And yet to convey the impression that the lads were greatly frightened as a result of what they had seen and heard would be doing them an injustice. Let it suffice to say that they were mystified and that they wondered a great deal what might come of their observations.

And right here it may be added, too, that, much as they pondered, much as they speculated upon the possible outcome of the evening's puzzle, no one of the lads for a moment guessed or in the least suspected how fully the days to come would be occupied with exciting incidents. They little thought that in what had already happened there was but a beginning of occurrences well calculated to make them flinch, could they have foreseen them.

Daylight brings always to those who have slept with conscience clear a renewed energy and freshened courage and ambition. It brought to the tenants of the shack of poles and boughs under the great trees beside the lake also a

lively interest in plans for exploring and investigation.

“G-ee whiz-z-z! I s’ppose we can’t exactly say we *own* the woods and the whole lake, all ourselves,” suggested Paul, cheerfully, shivering from a brief plunge and swim, while he rubbed himself briskly.

“Why, that’s the very worst of it! Are you just waking up?” answered Billy Worth, who was quite completely dressed now and past the shivering stage of the morning’s bath. “That’s where the trouble comes in about someone being in the old house, as I see it. You remember what they said at Staretta? The old house and the lake, too, together with a lot of land around them, still belong to the Longknives club. Even if they all have stopped coming here, as that Staretta chap said, it’s no sign that none of ’em ever will come. What if just a member or two have happened along? They could order us away, I reckon. Our just believing it is some-

one else at the old house don't keep it from being some Longknives fellows, I'm thinking."

"That's all right, Billy," Phil Way put in quietly, "but what we're all trying to get at is why we've never noticed any sign of life there until last night, and why everything was so dark there except for the flickers you and Paul saw. But—well, anyhow, here's your fire all ready," concluded Phil. "Let's have breakfast and then see what we can see."

MacLester loitered up and down the little strip of beach, scanning the Point and the old house very frequently. When he had finished dressing Paul joined him there. The scrutiny of neither found any reward, however, and Worth and Way called, "Breakfast!" before even so much as a bit of smoke had been discovered. Whoever it was who had taken possession of the abandoned clubhouse, it was plain, did not make early rising a practice.

"Some of us will have to go to Staretta today, or there'll be no coffee tomorrow morning,"

Chef Billy announced as the lads sat about their improvised table. "We need baking powder, too, and a slice of cheese wouldn't be bad to have."

"Sure! Cheese, and olives!" cried Paul with enthusiasm, mentioning the second item because, being very fond of both, the one had naturally suggested the other.

"Might get a lawn mower, too," suggested David, complacently picking a bit of grass out of his coffee.

"Get a clothes line; that would be more like it," smiled Phil. "That grass got in your cup because you put the tea towel on the ground to dry."

"There! Didn't I tell you? Might know something would happen! I wondered what it was I walked over in the dark last night. It was that blamed old towel and Bill wiped the cups out with it before he poured the coffee!" This from Paul brought a general laugh at David's expense and he sought to even the score.

“Wouldn’t make much difference if we *had* a clothes line,” was his rejoinder, “Jones would probably blunder into that, too, and choke himself as like as not. And even if he did get off alive the first time, he’d never escape, but fall all over everything again by going back to see what it was he had bumped into.”

The wordy encounters of Paul and Dave were far from being a novelty among the chums; but they were rarely anything other than extremely good-natured and often they enlivened the meal time and the campfire conversations.

“Joke! Use no hooks!” grinned Paul, quoting an imaginary shipping label.

“Yes, sir! It’ll be a busy day,” Phil broke in abruptly. “We’ll all go to Staretta right after dinner, so let’s see what exploring we can do before noon.”

Dishes were quickly washed and the shack put in order by Way and Worth. Paul carried water and wet down the ground all around the campfire so that a smouldering blaze might be

left without danger of its spreading—(a wise precaution when in the woods at any time during a period of dry weather)—while Dave wedged tight a loose oar lock of the clumsy fishing scow the lads were using.

By water the Point and the abandoned clubhouse were less than half a mile from the boys' camp. To follow the curvature of the shore and so reach the same destination by land would have been a trifle further. Perhaps it was for this reason that the youthful explorers chose to row the heavy boat instead of walking. Possibly, though, it was because the latter means of approach gave a better chance to study the old house and its surroundings from a comfortable distance. Also, it was plain, any person on the Point would immediately discover the boat as it drew out in open water. To show themselves—to be seen as well as to see, the friends considered was a wise plan.

Slowly they drew near the projecting strip of land. As yet the sun was scarcely higher than

the treetops, and the air was sweet and cool. Calm and smooth, the waters of the lake were like some vast mirror. The very green of the foliage could be seen in the reflections of the trees, lying hushed and deep along the shore line.

How still it was,—how tranquil and how beautiful! Yet there was an air of melancholy, too, that all could feel, if not definitely describe. Particularly did the boys notice this as they drew quite near the rotting piles and water-worn framework still clinging to them, that once had been the clubhouse wharf or pier.

From here the gaunt, old building with its columns of unhewn wood was seen quite clearly. The lower story of notched logs and slabs, from which the bark was falling away and, like all else about the place, tumbling to ruin and decay, was partially concealed by the undergrowth. The upper portion of the house was built of very good lumber. It appeared to have been added

to the heavier, lower structure as an after-thought.

One fact the boys were surprised to notice was that all the windows were perfectly sound—not a broken pane in sight. An upper window was open, quite as if someone had hurriedly left it so. Somehow this was the impression the young observers received, at any rate; for the lower sash was raised only half its height and the stick put under it was not perpendicular, but stood at an angle suggesting that it might fall at any moment.

“It was just about where that window is open that we saw the light flicker, Paul,” said Billy. He looked first toward the old house, then toward the camp, assuring himself of the line of vision.

“What we can see right now is more to the point,” put in MacLester. “Sing out! I don’t believe there’s a soul around, but—Hello!” Then again, “Hello-o-o!” he shouted.

Dave’s voice was far from being weak or

thin. His lusty tones, echoed back from the shore, were quite startling to the boys themselves. Yet there came no answer to his call, and the utter quiet that fell at once upon the lake again seemed like a weight upon the spirits of the chums.

The slow and heavy boat scarcely drifted now that the oars were still, and for a minute or two the impressive silence was unbroken.

Intently the boys studied the abandoned clubhouse and its wild woodland surroundings. Water from the roof had washed away the light sandy soil, digging its own gutter to the lake, taking also much of the ground where once the short path down to the wharf had been.

There was an open space on either side and between the walls of brush and saplings, giving the lads a partial view of the large covered porch. They saw steps, leading up to the veranda, made of logs hewed smooth on one side, and a door that once had been painted white,

was just beyond. They wondered if it were locked.

"I tell you there was nobody here but some fishing or hunting outfit and after staying all night they moved on. Been gone this good while, too," observed MacLester, with a degree of certainty in his tone, as if he spoke from actual knowledge.

"I suppose there'd be no harm in landing, even if there should be someone here," Phil Way proposed. "Goodness me, it's a free country!"

"Well, that's the most sensible remark yet," assented Worth. He picked up the oars. With Phil, Dave and Paul all serving as pilots and calling out very conflicting instructions, as is quite likely to be the case with four in a boat and only one pair of oars, he soon had the scow's nose in shore. There was no beach worthy of the name, so Way sprang quickly to the bank and secured the craft by means of a rope made fast to the prow.

“Gee! There’s nobody ’round *here*, you can tell that!” exclaimed Paul, moving slowly toward the porch. Half timidly he looked earnestly in all directions. “Why,” said he, “it actually sounds lonesome, smells lonesome, and tastes lonesome in your mouth, it does!”

So did he and others of the lads try to give expression to the feelings of questioning, vague unrest and loneliness that came over them. Here beside the deserted clubhouse and its long neglected grounds they were more aware of their wild surroundings,—felt infinitely more the fact that they were in the midst of a great forest, than they did when in their own camp or elsewhere with only the trees and brush of the vast woods around them.

Following a one-time path of gravel, edged with stones, from the lake, the boys walked around the east side of the house, coming on the south to a porch raised but one step above ground. Dust lay thick upon the warped and weather-beaten boards. There were two doors

here but the unswept floor showed no track whatever, leading either in or out.

With sudden determination Billy Worth stepped boldly up to what appeared to be the door of a living room—(the other door seemed to lead to a kitchen)—and somewhat less confidently he knocked.

“Hump! You might beat the door post off its base, but you’d get no answer,” observed MacLester, when twice the knocking had been repeated without result.

Two big blue-bottle flies were buzzing near, Billy noticed, as he now chanced a vigorous rap upon the door of the kitchen. “It means that there’s fish or some kind of meat scraps somewhere about or I’m no judge,” Worth declared.

But whether he was, or was not, a judge in such matters, the fact remained that not only did he fail to get any response to his knocking, but also he was unable to gain any important information with regard to the probability of

the house being occupied as, for a few seconds, he ventured to peep in at a window.

Joining Billy on the porch MacLester also peered in through the uncurtained windows. That the house was still furnished, at least in part, was apparent. Two plain but large and substantial rocking chairs were drawn near the empty, cheerless fireplace. In the center of the uncovered floor stood a long table but nothing was on it save a tall vase of some heavy, brown ware. It held a mass of dogwood blossoms long since withered and dead. Several porch chairs and a rough, home-made settee were piled in one corner as if the owners had hastily carried them there at the moment of locking up to go away.

These observations the two boys made in much less time than it has taken you to read of them. Other objects they might have noted were not seen at this time because of the dim light within and because they felt more than a little guilty of trespassing and of spying upon that

which was the private property of others. They did, however, notice before turning away that the large living room extended the entire width of the house, the door at the opposite side opening upon the porch toward the lake.

"Where are the fellows?" inquired Dave quickly, as unexpectedly he discovered Phil and Paul to be nowhere in sight.

"Out this way, I reckon," was Billy's answer, and he started forward along a path leading toward a clearing close by.

"Why, there's a road! a regular gravel road through the woods!" cried Paul Jones running up, as from a distance he beheld the two come into the open space. "There's a shed down below where they've stored their cars. And this roadway, why! Phil says he thinks it may go a long way toward Staretta! But the peculiar part of it is, that no one has used it. No one has been here for months, at least, and the ragweed and mullen and sprouts of young trees are covering up every sign of it as fast as they can!"

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERIOUS GRAVEL ROAD

As nearly as the four friends could judge, in the limited investigation made at this time, the narrow road, cut through the woods and improved with a thick coating of well-packed gravel, had not been used for a very long time. It followed the shore of the lake for several hundred yards and then, in a natural clearing, formed a loop.

Returning in this way, near the house, the road met the path, now almost obscured by the encroaching brush. That the drive did not lead directly to the door of the establishment was probably because some fine large trees would have had to be cut down to permit of it, the boys decided.

How far in the opposite direction the trail of gravel led was a question all four were eager to

have answered. Wondering much upon the presence of so considerable an improvement, indulging in the wildest fancies both as to why the work had been started and the possible cause of it being abandoned, the four of them studiously surveyed its sinuous course.

For nearly a mile the gravel track led forward toward Staretta. In places its course was straight as an arrow. Again a considerable curve was made to pass around some sharp rise of land. Over very low ground and boggy spots bridges of stone and logs had been constructed.

It was apparent that a large sum of money had been expended. Why, then, had the drive been unused and uncared for? Surely the owners must know that but another year or two of such neglect would result in the roadway being so nearly swallowed up by the forest growth that only by great labor could it be restored to usefulness.

Suddenly came the end. At the brow of a small hill the improvement terminated abruptly.

By degrees the road had been inclining eastward as if it had been the builders' plans to join the main trail leading out from the forest and to Staretta. But however this may have been, such junction had never been effected. In a long, low heap of stones and gravel, never packed or rolled, or so much as leveled down, the drive found its southern terminus.

Below the brow of the hill and for a little distance through the valley the course had been cleared of trees and brush. A couple of logs were hauled up to the banks of a tiny stream and partially hewed for a bridge. In an end of one of them stuck a rusty, broken axe. Except for its appearance of being long unused, one would have supposed that a workman had just left it there, expecting to return to his labor directly. A broken wagon wheel lay on the ground, a rank growth of weeds and shoots of tiny trees coming up between the spokes and all about where it lay.

“And here is where they had a camp of some

kind," called Phil, who had gone down into the valley ahead of the rest. "See the heap of ashes and forked posts for their kettles!"

"Look where they had their horses, too! There must have been a hundred teams at least!" Paul exclaimed, catching sight of the litter of straw and the earth trodden hard and bare over a wild area. "Now why do you suppose so much work was ever done only to be stopped as if at the drop of a hat?"

Stunted mullen, thin, straggling thistles and a few feeble stalks of corn somehow found a foothold in the dry, hard earth near the ashes of the long dead campfires, amidst the dry, old hemlock boughs on which the men may have had their beds, and among the rotting straw and chips and refuse all about. A well-marked foot-path led to the brook, though the latter was now quite dry. A pair of worn-out overalls, faded by exposure to a vagabond color, not blue nor gray, yet like both of these, hung high up in the forks of a beech tree.

Each moment the boys discovered still other signs of large activities there in the silent forest, that suddenly had ceased. One other thing only, perhaps, is worthy of mention. This was a large and heavy iron sledge lying beside the stump of a young ash tree, its handle broken and splintered in a hundred pieces, on the ground beside it.

The trunk of the ash was not broken entirely off, but nearly so. Only a few splinters and tattered shreds of bark still held it to the stump. The tree had been about four inches in diameter, the chums judged. A great force, indeed, would have been necessary to rend and break it so.

For some time the young explorers sat on the partially prepared logs of the bridge. With deep curiosity and at great length they speculated upon their discoveries.

"The Staretta folks will likely know a good deal about it all," said Phil. "We'll inquire this afternoon."

"Wouldn't it be fine and dandy if the gravel

went all the way to town?" put in Paul. "But it sure does beat the band!"

Precisely what the speaker meant by his latter expression may not be clear. Possibly he referred to the fact that the band of workmen had been defeated and beaten by the stupendous nature of the task they had set out to perform, being finally forced, in fact, to abandon it. Then again, it may be that this wasn't what Paul had in mind at all. *He* knew, no doubt, the meaning he intended to convey, even if he could not easily have put it into different words. Very likely his companions knew, too, for MacLester's answer was:

"It beats *me*! But let's go back to the house. Who knows but what the club may send someone here to go ahead with this road and finish it up? Who knows but the club will say, 'Why, certainly, young gentlemen, you seem to be such a very intelligent and agreeable lot of neighbors that we expressly desire you to make use of our

road and our lake and our grounds to the fullest extent possible!' I say, who knows?'"

Not at all like David, usually the last one to take a cheerful view of any problem, was this speech of his; but Phil laughed and said, "'ave 'opes,'" and together the quartette trudged up the hill.

The sun was hot and the air still and close. Even when out of the small clearing of the valley and amid the shade of the great trees, closely bordering the strange road to the Point and the old house there, the boys found the atmosphere warm and oppressive. They were glad to hasten on to the water and a breath of whatever slight breeze might be stirring there.

Yet their spirits were high with enthusiasm over a plan they now discussed to clear the gravel road of present obstructions and make good use of it with their car. It would be "terrible toil"—at least these were Paul Jones' words—to throw fallen branches aside and cut away the brush that boldly encroached in places,

but there was ample reward ahead. Particularly would this be true if later on a connecting trail could be cut through to the road toward Staretta.

The thought that they were trespassing upon private grounds, which would have come to the boys and to which they would have given heed under ordinary circumstances, was dispelled by the abandoned condition of all they saw. Arriving again at the clubhouse, they walked all about the building and peeped into every window of the lower floor, quite as if it was their perfect right to do so.

A discovery Phil made as he looked in at a rear window of the kitchen, though trivial in itself, was deemed highly important by all the boys. The furnishings of the kitchen were plain and simple—an iron stove for wood and also a gasoline stove at one side of the room, and a closed cupboard at another. There were a couple of kitchen chairs and a rack for drying clothes. Near the west window was a plain

table. On it was a water bucket and above hung a dipper. There were two lamps on the table, also, besides a reflecting wall lamp between the cupboard and the stoves.

But it was none of these things that the four friends considered remarkable. The extraordinary item remains to be mentioned—merely a tiny pool of liquid,—water, it was presumed—beside the bucket on the kitchen table. How could it have come there? Surely not through a leaky roof, for instance, for there had been no rain for weeks. All this section of the state was parched and dry. And certainly the water had been spilled upon the table recently. It would have been evaporated and gone long ago, otherwise.

“Simple thing enough,” said Billy Worth, “but it confirms our knowledge that someone was in the house last night, and likely had a fire in the kitchen stove, so making the smoke we saw. How does it come that everything is so vacant today then—no other sign of a solitary

creature having been here for months? That's what I want to know."

It was evident that the inquiring Mr. Worth was not alone in his desire to be informed. The question he asked was expressed in one form and another by his companions many, many times. Even after they had returned to the clumsy fishing boat and were pulling slowly toward their own camp, Paul Jones broke out, "I say it beats the band!" And he said it in a way that ought to have settled the whole matter, which, unfortunately, it didn't.

Though it was not yet noon Chef Billy prepared a hasty dinner of roasting ears and bread and butter, with crackers broken into coffee, like soup, for dessert. The others, meanwhile, were preparing the car and themselves for the drive to Staretta. Billy got himself ready, then, while his friends made one of their famous record-breaking performances in the matter of clearing the table and the dish washing.

It was not without some misgiving that the

lads left their camp and its equipment unguarded. They had always done so before, but that was prior to their suspicion that the house on the Point was secretly occupied. However, as their rifle, their best fishing tackle and other most valued belongings were in a strong box and under lock and key, they were left so with the hope that nothing would be disturbed.

Billy took the driver's seat and skilfully backed and turned the car into the narrow trail. The irregular lane wound with many a twist and turn among the trees. It had been cut through a great while ago, being in fact, a continuation of the public highway northward from Staretta. But at the lake it ended. One would have thought the builders must have contemplated bridging over that body of water at some future day, but more likely the facts were that they had merely followed the course of least resistance until the lake was reached.

At one time and another the trail had been put to some use, for the tracks of wagon wheels

showed plainly and the ruts were deep where there had been mud and water holes. These were dry now and the heavy black earth baked hard.

Only to a slight extent had travel smoothed the rough places. Men sometimes drove to the lake from Staretta to fish and some timber had been hauled from the woods. But the boys now considered it probable that the owners of the clubhouse had wrought the most of what little improvement the trail showed. Still they wondered the more that so much work had been done and all to so little purpose.

Gently over the rough places, speeding up momentarily as the course permitted, using throttle and clutch and brake always intelligently, Billy sent the Thirty forward at an exceedingly good average speed, the road considered. Rarely did he shift gear levers and not very often did Dave and Paul bounce uncomfortably in the tonneau seats.

"Just about five miles to the first neighbors,"

announced Worth as the car passed the tiny clearing where a settler had built his small, one-story house. "It must be over twelve miles from the lake to the first bit of open country."

"Nearer fourteen," declared Paul. "I noticed the speedometer the other day. But the road is worse farther on than it is the first few miles from the lake. It—well, *say!*"

Paul's interruption of his own remarks was caused by his suddenly catching sight of a cow feeding on the parched grass at the border of the settler's small clearing. "And they told us they didn't keep a cow—couldn't *sell* us any milk!" continued Jones, explosively. "What's the good of anybody *lying* like that?"

"They're ignorant people and afraid of us, like as not. They simply didn't want us coming there," said Phil, turning half around to face the tonneau. "They had no eggs, either, they *said*. It was just to get rid of us. But we'll get eggs and milk, too, before two weeks are up," he added confidently. For he was thinking

that never yet had the Auto Boys failed to make friends with their neighbors, excepting only, perhaps in the case of Jonas Tagg, and nobody whatever ever cared to be, or could be, friendly with him.

Quite possible is it that if Phil had known who lived in the small clearing and something of the history of these people he would not have believed so readily that their friendship would be won at the first opportunity. He would have had a better understanding, at least, of their unfriendly attitude in refusing to sell supplies. But now the poor, unpainted little house had been left in the distance and over a stretch of good road Billy was making time—"just to stir up a little breeze and get cooled off," he explained.

For a few miles after emerging from the woods the boys drove through a section even more lonely and wild than the forest itself. It was a wide area that some years before had been swept over by fire. The charred stumps

of trees, some burned bare of every branch, some still holding out great leafless, lifeless limbs, like ghostly arms, gave the whole country a desolate appearance. The rough second growth, the coarse grass and weeds of many kinds little improved the dreary scene. There under the burning sun they seemed just ready for another great fire.

“I’d like to meet a couple of bad men on this road about midnight of a dark night,—*not*,” remarked Billy Worth.

He gave quick glances from side to side, but never took his attention wholly from the road before him. “I should think *not*!”

“It is odd that such a picture of desolation as this should make our camp seem so much more home-like and secure even if it *is* in the midst of the woods,” Phil answered. “We never think of anything creepy or dreadful among the trees and beside the water.”

“Because they are *friends* of ours,” spoke up

Paul, with that ever ready smile. And who shall say he was not right?

From the beginning of time mankind has loved to be beneath the trees and beside the water. Only necessity and, to some extent, a most unnatural mode of life have led people to dwell in great cities and smaller towns,—even in uncouth, homely hamlets, too, the like of Staretta.

And here now is the odor of fresh sawdust strong in the noses of the four young travelers. Here is Staretta itself, with its scattered small houses and its general need of paint. Here, too, upon the road, is a young man driving a one-horse wagon from the chief grocery and general store.

“Link Fraley!” exclaimed Phil. Billy had turned to give the wagon a share of the road, Like a good driver, he was watching where the car was going rather than looking to see whom he might be meeting. As Way spoke he stopped the machine. The wagon stopped alongside.

“Well! how goes it?” said Mr. Lincoln Fraley, turning squarely around till his long legs hung over the side of his high spring seat.

“What’s the row back at the lake?”

“No row, nothing like that at all; but what do you know about a gravel automobile road way back there in the woods? Who in the world started it and why wasn’t it finished?” asked Phil Way quickly.

“Hum!—hum!—gravel road, way back in the woods. Gravel road! Well, that there’s quite a story,” observed Mr. Fraley, puckering his forehead and pursing up his lips, as if it was some secret he had been asked to tell. “Gravel road,” he repeated, reflectively shaking his head. “Gravel road, way back in the woods!”

CHAPTER V

THE LONGKNIVES CLUB

Lincoln Fraley was a rough, unkempt but likable sort of a fellow. His age was not far from thirty years, though the average observer would have guessed him to be much younger. The very short trousers he wore, as is often the fashion with men who work in the woods, made him look like a big, awkward boy. His beardless face and the shapeless old felt hat on the back of his head heightened the generally youthful effect.

“Yes, gravel road!” piped Paul Jones impatiently. He was afraid Link’s soliloquy would be confined to a mere repetition of what he had already said. “What’s the story?—‘Way back in the woods!’ We know that!”

“Where ye goin’?” asked Mr. Fraley, coolly, in response; and he then went on to say that he

must deliver some feed he had in his wagon before he would have much time for talk—"chin music," he called it.

The boys proposed that after calling at the postoffice they would stop at Fraley's store—(Link's father was the proprietor)—and there make some purchases and await their friend's return. This arrangement being satisfactory, Billy drove forward. Young Mr. Fraley turned farther and farther around in his seat, to watch the automobile, and at last clucked to his horse and started on, though facing the rear of his wagon.

Link's marked interest in the car did not escape notice. "We'll give him a little ride," said Billy Worth, "and if he does know the history of the Longknives Club and that gravel drive, he'll tell it then."

At the postoffice the boys sent cards home; but as there had hardly been time for mail to reach them since information as to their address had gone forward, they were not greatly

disappointed in receiving no letters. Still they each one made inquiry, hoping that there *might* be something there, as everyone does under such circumstances. Then they visited Fraley's store.

"Don't forget the cheese," Paul reminded Billy, and "Gee! some sardines would be good!" he exclaimed in the same breath. "How about the olives?" he asked the next instant, and further, "Wonder how some of that breakfast food would go!"

Phil and Dave sat on a big, empty box quietly observing Worth's purchases but leaving the whole matter to him. Jones did not mean to be annoying, nor was he trying to be funny. He just did not realize that he was interrupting the business transactions between the storekeeper and his friend.

"And now a penny's worth of gumdrops," said Billy, in the most matter-of-fact way. Phil and Dave exchanged glances of surprise. Paul's mouth opened wide in astonishment. Mr.

Fraley, Sr., counted out six of the vari-colored confections from a glass dish in the not very tidy candy showcase.

“Needn’t wrap ’em up,” said Worth, quickly taking the drops in his hand. And then severely, “Here, Paul,” he said, taking that young gentleman by the wrist, “you sit down in the corner here and amuse yourself. Papa may have to leave you at home another time.” He had gently pushed the surprised young Mr. Jones to the floor beside the big box, and now put the gumdrops into his hands before the latter recovered from his confusion.

Dave and Phil laughed while, with a little smile of satisfaction, Billy went on with his purchasing. For one of the few times in his whole life Jones blushed furiously and his usually ready tongue failed him. Yet it was for only a few seconds that his embarrassment lasted. An expansive grin succeeded his look of infinite astonishment and then, like the comical fellow he was, he began nibbling the candy

with apparently genuine enjoyment. With legs crossed under him he was quiet as a mouse and so he remained till called away.

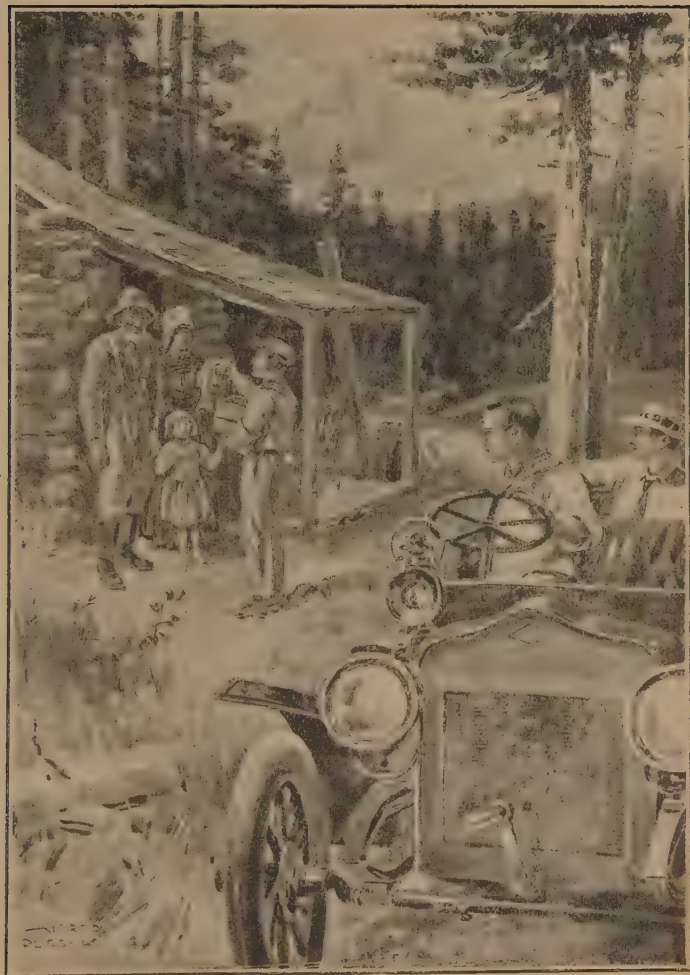
"I'm not at all sure that Jones didn't have really the best of it, when you've figured it all out," observed Dave, afterward.

"Didn't hurt my feelings any," chirped Paul, and what he said was doubtless true. But what Phil thought, though he did not speak, "And it likely did you some good," was no doubt true, also. For even in jests one may learn a great deal if he be in the least degree observing.

Though the boys little guessed it, the moderate squelching of Paul Jones' almost too "smart" manner was really quite timely. Fraley had said to himself that one of the boys was "too fresh," whatever that may be. He was not sure in his own mind whether he would tell them anything of the Longknives Club or not, as he swung himself right side around in his seat at last, and so finally returned to the store.

However, as he found that in some way a curb had been put upon Paul's tongue, and that all the boys were disposed to be agreeable without being over-familiar, he relented. He had no time for an automobile ride he said, but if the "very congenial company keered to go" to the railroad station with him, "while he fetched a small jag o' freight," he would impart all that he knew of that gravel road—"Gravel road, way back in the woods." He said the words over twice or three times, just as he had done before. He seemed almost unable to comprehend that the road was there.

The boys were beginning now to get a better understanding of Mr. Fraley, Jr., than they had yet had. They saw that he was afraid of being regarded as a country bumpkin—that he wanted their respect as well as their friendly words. Not that any disrespect had been shown him, but that in their wish to be cordial they had been somewhat too free, perhaps.



"Nice fish," protested Paul in tones meant to be friendly.
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"Sure! We'll help to load the freight, too," said Billy, in response to the invitation.

"Guess I can handle all there is to haul this trip; but pile in," replied Link.

Dave and Paul were lucky in getting on the wide spring seat with the driver. Billy and Phil stood up behind, avoiding danger of sitting down more suddenly and severely than was likely to be pleasant by holding on to the shoulders of those in front of them.

Slowly the heavy wagon rumbled along the dusty road. Slowly, as his manner of speech invariably was, Lincoln Fraley told the story of the ambitious dream of the Longknives Club and its sudden termination. Quite of its own accord the old horse had drawn up and stopped before the freight platform of the little railroad station ere the narrative was finished; and lest it take equally long to repeat the tale just as Link told it, only the essential facts will be herein reported.

Starting with a modest little cabin on Opal

Lake, the Longknives Club for several years flourished exceedingly. Its membership was made up of young men in a leading city of the central states. With the advent of automobiling they came in motoring parties, sometimes in the fall or early winter to hunt, sometimes at other seasons to fish or just to relax in and on the waters of the lovely lake while getting all the benefit pine-scented breezes and plain living could give them. Then it was that the original cabin, already twice enlarged, was further increased by the addition of a second floor.

In the enthusiasm of the membership that season when the first little cabin upon the Point had become a really considerable clubhouse the project of building an automobile road was launched. At first it was intended to have a driveway all around the lake. Then it was voted to change the plans and construct first a good road to Staretta in place of the narrow trail that furnished the only connection the club had with the village, the railroad and the better

public roads leading south and so on to the lakeport cities.

Link Fraley said the Longknives went about the business of road-building "like a lot of pigeon-toed pirates lost in the mountains." But be that as it may, there certainly was a great lack of system and proper organization in their efforts. With utter disregard of well-defined plans, if such existed, scores of men and teams were set to work. Gravel was hauled from the shores of the lake by thousands of loads. An army of laborers cut the path, hewed logs for bridges and retaining walls and leveled and packed the roadway.

Nels Anderson, a giant Swede, was the general superintendent, head foreman and "chief log-roller" all combined in one. He lived on the route from Staretta to Opal Lake. His little house, though miles from the Point, was the only one within the Club's range. He had come to know the members well. Also he had profited much by the eggs, the milk, butter and

other supplies his wife furnished the Longknives every summer and fall.

Nels was proud of his position—proud of the trust and confidence placed in him by these men from the city. If they said, “Nels, get more teams, get the work to moving faster,” he scoured the countryside for long miles, but he increased his force. Every day from dawn till dark he worked fast and furiously himself and bade others keep the pace he set. As well as they could they followed, though few shared his own intense personal zeal and enthusiasm. They were working not for honor nor the fun of it, but for so much per day.

And pay day didn't come.

Never mind, Nels said, the month was not up. Wait! Still, too, it was “wait!” when four weeks, then five weeks, and more had passed. There was muttering first, then angry words. Nels would see, he said.

Late fall had come and all the Longknives had gone, each one on departing leaving orders to

push the work,—“Push the work, Nels! It'll be a grand road for next summer!”

But pay for the men! For himself, Anderson felt no uneasiness. But he started on horseback to go to Staretta. He would come back, he said, with the money for every man's pay.

He met another horseman upon the road, or so he afterward claimed. The latter was on his way to ask him to meet Griffith Grandall, the treasurer of the Longknives in Staretta, at once.

Nels met Mr. Grandall, or so the story went, and received orders to suspend all work at once, for the Longknives' treasurer had been robbed of the payroll money intended for Anderson and his men.

With nearly twenty thousand dollars in a suit case he had set out in his car to reach Staretta and so Lake Opal, from a lakeport town fifty miles away. No one had knowledge that he carried the cash. He had been sure of that. Yet someone must have suspected, for

of a sudden a bullet whizzed close to his ear and before he could look about he was seized from behind.

It was Mr. Grandall's assertion that he never really saw the robbers, being blindfolded before he could make a single defensive move or so much as look about him. He was left half dead, tied to his roadster automobile and gagged and blindfolded, after every particle of gasoline had been drained from the car by the simple process of splitting the tank open with an axe. For four hours he lay there. Two timber buyers who had been inspecting stumpage south of Staretta chanced to find him and carried him to town.

"You'll have to suspend work and tell your men they must wait awhile for their pay—I hope not long," were the instructions the treasurer, still weak and nervous, gave Anderson at Staretta. "Let all the men go. Tell them to be ready to come back, and not to be impatient."

Whereupon Mr. Grandall boarded a train for home. His car was shipped by freight after being towed in from the scene of the robbery.

In dismay, silent, grief-stricken, but holding back manfully the impulse to let his despair find vent in tears and sobs, the great, simple Swede returned to the camp—the last camp the workmen were ever to have upon the gravel road. It was just night when he reached the scene. Men were feeding their horses, others washing up for supper. The fragrance of beans and pork, piping hot from the cook's quarters, was in the air.

It is a bad time to give a man unwelcome tidings when he is tired and hungry. There is much less disposition in him to listen to reason. The well-fed creature of any kind is more tractable than the hungry one.

These things, perhaps, did not occur to Nels. He leaped upon a log. In a minute he had told his story—given his instructions.

A muttering and then a howl went up—a

fierce, angry, impatient howl. It hardened Nels Anderson's feelings of pity instantly—turned his grief for the men to anger at them.

Then came the climax.

"Nice snug wad for him to tuck away at his shanty as he came along up from town!" called a thoughtless, foolish fellow from the semi-darkness.

"Dot bane one black lie!" shouted the great Swede furiously. "Who say? Ah—kill—*kill him!*"

And seizing a heavy iron sledge the giant fellow whirled in his burst of rage and, as if showing how he would strike such an accuser dead, brought the weapon smashing against an ash.

With frightful force the blow fell. The tough, rugged tree was broken and felled like a rotten sapling. But the hickory handle of the sledge was slivered to a thousand pieces and Nels Anderson's arms dropped limp and lifeless to his sides.

Both his wrists and his fore-arm bones were shattered by the blow's terrific force. The palms of both hands were split open as the sun cracks wet clay. The blood flowed out in streams.

They took the big fellow home. Like a little child the giant sobbed and cried. The pent-up emotion he had restrained so long had found vent, but at what dreadful cost!

He was never strong again. His vast energy and ambition, also, seemed to have spent themselves wholly in that tremendous blow with the sledge. Either that or brooding over the thought that he was secretly suspected of stealing the money with which to pay the men sapped all his courage and determination. He still lived, as best he could, with help of wife and little girl, eking out a livelihood in his small clearing beside the lake road.

"Then that is the house—Nels Anderson's place, the little one-story frame cabin standing

by itself, that we pass well on toward the lake?" said Phil Way questioningly.

"That very same," returned Link Fraley.

"But, say," put in Billy Worth quickly, "there seems to be someone staying at the old clubhouse. We've seen the smoke. Were the men ever paid? Do the Longknives fellows ever come here now?"

Mr. Fraley asserted quite positively that Billy "couldn't prove it by him." But he added:

"No, the Longknives Club went to smash. That's the report we get here. The money that order have gone to pay off Anderson's army was never made up a second time. The robbery, no matter who got the pile, busted 'em. The man Grandall couldn't make the loss good nohow—just a clerk in a bank. We did hear that he didn't put it none past Anderson and some of his men that he was laid out as he was; but *I* don't believe it. The hull club property was under a plaster an' it'll be foreclosed and

sold, come another year. The same fellers as holds the mortgage bought up the time of Anderson's outfit finally,—bought up the whole ball o' wax fer just five cents on the dollar."

"How —" Phil Way would have spoken, but Link quickly continued.

"Somebody been at the clubhouse, hey? Somebody been at the clubhouse an' ye seen the smoke? Well! By ginger! I heard some fellers were after deer and 'tain't nowheres near the season. It's against the law, you know. They'd have to keep pretty low—pretty low! That's about who's in the old house! In the old clubhouse! An' ye seen the smoke!"

CHAPTER VI

THE SCOWLING MAN

Partly because he knew the country and the woods for miles around, but also because of his extensive acquaintance among the people of the locality, gained through meeting them in the store, Link Fraley was a valuable source of information to the Auto Boys. Indeed, it was from Link and no one else that the lads had learned of the desirability of Opal Lake as a camping place. Their inquiry had been made quite casually when they first stopped in Staretta for supplies. He even offered the young tourists the use of an old, flat-bottomed fishing boat kept by him for his own occasional visits to the lake. That his friendly proposition was accepted has already been made apparent.

“We were sure you could tell us about that gravel road if anyone could,” said Phil Way,

riding back to the store. The boys had helped at loading the freight to be hauled and Link was so appreciative they could not but feel themselves fairly established in his good graces. "But what do you really think of there being someone in the clubhouse? If it is some fellow up here hunting deer out of the season, as you suggested, perhaps —"

Phil paused. Mr. Fraley looked at him questioningly: "Perhaps," he prompted at last, "what then?"

"Perhaps it would be better if we had kept quiet about it, not mentioning anything even to you. Because —"

"I thought likely that was what you was driving at," Link broke in with a grin. "You thought I might tell and that would get you into a row because of your telling me. But don't shy at your shadows. I'll never say a word. On t'other hand, if you do see anything else worth talking about," he added, more seriously, "I'd jest naturally like to hear of it. I

wouldn't care to have you say I said it, not to anybody, but the way the Longknives Club went to smash never looked to me quite as if it was the end of the story. Who was it that actually got that twenty thousand dollars from Mr. Grandall? Did he divide with Nels Anderson or didn't he? Or was he robbed, just as he said? They never found hide nor hair of the robbers and that's one *sure* thing! Never track nor trace!"

Not forgetting to thank the obliging Link for all he had told them, and promising to bring him a fine mess of fish in return for the use of his boat, the four chums turned their car homeward.

The story of the robbery and the almost tragic ending of the gravel road project had made a deep impression upon them all. They talked of little else. But they could come to no conclusion that seemed a satisfactory answer to the question whether Mr. Grandall was or was not really robbed as he had said. Neither

could they find in this mystery even so much as a theory that might connect it with what seemed to be the secret presence of some person or persons in the old clubhouse.

Nearly three years had passed since the heavy financial loss had broken up the Longknives' organization. So far as Fraley had been able to tell, not one of the members thereof had visited the lake in all this time. It was hardly likely any of them would come now.

"We'll make Nels Anderson's acquaintance. He could talk mighty interestingly about the old house on the Point, if he would," remarked Billy Worth. "We'll just leave a couple of nice bass for him the next time we go to town."

As their car drew near the low, unpainted dwelling, so far from neighbors of any kind, save only the wild creatures of the woods, the boys looked with lively interest from end to end of the small clearing. A garden, a small potato patch and a little corn constituted the only visi-

ble source of food supply, apart from that furnished by chickens and a cow.

The weather had been very dry. The potatoes and corn would yield poorly at best. There was a hard winter ahead of the Andersons if appearances were not wholly deceptive. Just as the Auto Boys had passed, Nels Anderson himself appeared at the open door of the house. Dave, happening to glance back, caught sight of his massive frame and was sure the giant fellow was looking after the car. He got the impression, somehow, that something more than curiosity or merely indifferent interest was expressed in their neighbor's manner. What else than these there was though, Mac couldn't say.

"He might have a big enough bone to pick with some of the Longknives, but he'd have no grudge against us," was Phil Way's comment.

Paul was driving and this fact only, it is certain, was the reason he had little to say. The man at the wheel does well to talk no more than necessary even when roads are good. But

Jones heard the conversation of the others and for himself made an unexpressed resolve that he would see something of the interior of the abandoned clubhouse before another day had passed. There would be no real peace for himself or friends, he reasoned, until they all had done so.

It was near sundown when Paul brought the automobile to a halt on the bank above the lake. Purposely he had slowly coasted to within a few feet of the sharp descent to the beach.

"I suppose you *could* run right down into the water," observed MacLester dryly. "It would be all right till you wanted to run out again, maybe."

"Thought myself that Paul was past the 'showing off' stage," put in Billy.

"Why, you two make me quite irritable," responded Jones quickly, pretending to be extremely nice in his manner and choice of words, "yes, honestly, you give me the fidgets," he added in his own natural tone and style. "All

I wanted to do was to see if there's any smoke over on the Point tonight. Couldn't see anything from back in the woods!"

"None from here, either," put in Phil, still seated beside the driver of the car. "We'll look again later," he added, closely scrutinizing the building in the distance.

And the boys did look again later and many times but without result. If the old clubhouse was occupied this evening there was no visible sign of such fact.

"I have an idea," said Billy as the quartette sat talking after supper, "at least the thought comes into my head that there is some member of the Longknives Club staying in the old house and he keeps himself scarce for fear of Nels Anderson. What I most especially mean is that whoever is down there would have no reason for wishing to hide from us. They, or he, would have pretty good cause for keeping out of sight of that poor chap the Longknives just as good as ruined. The way Anderson

smashed that ash tree is plenty enough sign that he might be a bad man if he got on his ear just right."

It will be noted that Billy said "ear." Possibly he meant to say "ire;" but nevertheless it was the former word he used. Maybe it makes no difference; but yet reasonably well educated people might be driven to the dictionaries to find just what his meaning might be, and still fail to discover the significance of Nels Anderson or anyone else getting, doing or being just the thing young Mr. Worth said.

It was Paul Jones' opinion that no further sign of the recent tenant of the clubhouse would be seen. Voicing this belief quite forcibly, he prevailed upon Phil to agree that in the morning another trip should be made to the Point. If no one was found there, a close inspection of the interior of the old house might be made. So long as nothing was disturbed what harm would be done?

"None," asserted Paul very positively in

answer to his own question. "No more than a rabbit." It was merely a figurative way of expressing himself. Paul's expressions often were of a slightly figurative character, it may have been observed.

Once or twice again before going to bed the boys looked to see if any light appeared at the old house as had appeared the night before. They saw nothing though they watched for some time. And when they did rake together the embers of the campfire and put on a bit of log to smoulder and keep live coals for morning, they felt possibly a little more easy,—a little more comfortable in their minds, as they reflected that even if they had had a near neighbor the preceding night, they probably had none now.

Some time far into the night a heavy splash-ing in the lake, at no very distant point, awoke MacLester. He listened closely. The sound, it seemed to him, was like that of a man wad-ing noisily through shallow water. In a few

minutes the noise grew less and presently ceased.

Dave resisted his first impulse to rouse his friends because he was afraid of ridicule. Once before he had called to them upon being disturbed in the night. Investigation disclosed nothing more alarming than Paul's old yellow motor coat flapping in the wind, where he had hung it to dry, after a vigorous attempt at a washing of that much stained garment, and—well, no one enjoys being laughed at. But even when he heard the splashing noise no more Mac-Lester was still wakeful.

He knew from many sounds which reached his ears that creatures of the woods were creeping down in the darkness to drink. He easily imagined that all about the lake's margin many small animals and even foxes, porcupines and possibly wildcats might be seen if it were daylight. Even deer, he was sure, would be driven to the lake for water, for the entire region was suffering from a long unbroken drouth.

Not greatly disturbed by the thought of the many nocturnal neighbors up and down the lake's shores, Dave was just falling asleep again when a sound unlike any he had yet heard reached him. Was it the quiet dipping and lifting of oars, the gentle swish of a boat's prow through the water?

In his nervous condition the listener could not be positive. Still he refrained from waking his companions and still he heard, or believed he heard, the slow and steady rowing of a boat—even felt as if a squeaking lock blended with the low and even rhythm of the oars.

Getting partly out of bed, Dave stood on hands and knees for a long time peering into the darkness. The lake lay calm and dark before him. He could distinguish no objects upon its surface, could see nothing more than that out beyond the deeper shadows of the trees, the water's dark surface reached away till thick blackness swallowed it. But the seeming sound

of oars was gone. The lad was satisfied on this point. He thought the quiet rise and fall had moved in the direction of the Point and the old house. So thinking, he dozed off at last.

"The heavy splashing might have been some big fish that got close to shore and was floundering around in water too shallow for him," suggested Phil as Dave told after breakfast next morning, in just the most casual manner he could, of the sounds that awakened him.

"Why, certainly, a big fish swimming around without any headlights! No oil in his side lamps either, likely," exclaimed Paul in that gleefully self-satisfied way he often had. "He'll be telling every thing in the lake today all about how it happened, and how sleek he was to pull through without even twisting a fender!"

Dave sniffed contemptuously but deigned no reply. He would not speak of the sounds he thought were oars, he decided, unless he had the opportunity of talking with Phil alone.

The chance he wished came only a little later.

Billy and Paul went down along the beach to see if the great fish they supposed Mac had heard might not still be imprisoned in some shallow spot.

In telling Way all about the queer noises of the night David found a ready and sympathetic listener. Phil did not know, though, how much importance might be attached to his suspicion that some person had been rowing near the camp for purposes of observation.

"It does look," said he, "as if we'd have to go to the bottom of this mysterious feeling we all have about the clubhouse. You are pretty sure, are you, that the boat, if there was a boat, passed by and went over toward the Point?"

Before Mac could answer there came a yell from the beach. "A bear! Tracks of a bear down here in the sand not a hundred yards from our boat," shouted Billy Worth.

"Like thunder!" exclaimed MacLester doubtfully.

"Just what you heard wading and splashing—a *bear!*" spoke Phil excitedly, and both boys leaped down the bank and sped along the beach.

There could be no mistaking the large, almost man-like tracks in the wet sand. Not a great deal about bears would the combined knowledge of the boys show, but by the footprints and depth of the depressions they reasoned that the visitor was no mere cub.

"I'll bet a million dollars I know *somebody* who ain't going to bunk right on the ground tonight!" piped young Mr. Jones vehemently. "Why, gee whiz!" he exclaimed, "gee whiz!" And a number of times again Paul's utter astonishment found vent in the same expression.

"Oh, I guess there's no danger of a bear bothering us any—'specially if we have a little fire burning," was Billy Worth's comment. Phil agreed with him but Dave was more inclined to agree with Paul. The latter was still ejaculating at intervals, "Gee whiz!" Now he added, "I'll bet *two* million dollars I'll get un-

der the hood of the car or some place tonight!"

Of course Jones was not half so badly frightened as he pretended, but a suggestion Dave made that, if they were only sure there was no one in the old clubhouse, it would be a good deal better place to sleep than in their open shack, found great favor, for some reason, at once.

The remark served also as a reminder that the Point and its buildings were to be further explored today. Nothing but the usual morning tidying up of the camp prevented an immediate start, and this task was performed very shortly.

The better to familiarize themselves with the lay of the land the friends adopted a suggestion Way made and set out to walk to the Point following the margin of the lake. However, upon coming to the bay, whose western boundary was the projecting neck of land, they found it necessary to take to the woods. The shore was marshy here and quite grown up to

weeds and low brush. The ground, too, instead of being sandy was more thick and plastic, like clay. The fact that the water was unusually low was made more noticeable than along the sandy beach. A sticky surface had been left as it receded. In this the tracks of many birds and small animals could be seen.

On account of low brush the boys made quite a detour from the shore in approaching the clubhouse. The same oppressive, melancholy quiet they had noticed about the place before, they felt again as they came out upon the gravel road. Going forward confidently, notwithstanding, they crossed the wooded space between the house and the drive. Paul headed at once for the porch but Billy proposed having a look into the auto shed first and the others followed him.

The garage, if the long, low structure of boards nailed to heavy posts sunk in the ground, with a sloping roof of the same material, could be so called, fronted upon the road built for

some distance along the lake shore. There were eight wide doors and room within, apparently, for an even greater number of cars.

"Shut up tight," announced Billy, scanning the row of padlocks; but closer inspection disclosed one place from which a staple to secure the lock had been withdrawn. Somewhat nervously, if the whole truth be told, the boys opened this door. Noisily the rollers creaked upon their track.

"Snug enough," was Paul's comment, going inside. And in general he was right. A floor of hard-packed gravel, dry and clean, there was and many more conveniences than one would have expected to find in the wilderness. A gasoline engine, with a long line of iron pipe and hose attached, had been used, it was apparent, to pump water from the lake to wash cars and fill radiators. Further inspection showed, too, that pipes were laid to the clubhouse so that water could be provided for every room, if desired.

In the central stall of the long shed was a workbench quite completely fitted up with a vise and a lathe. The power of the gasoline engine was made applicable here by a line of shafting though there were no belts of consequence in view. Whether none had been left by the owners or whether they had been stolen, the chums could not determine. They resolved to come back to the garage for a further inspection of its facilities after glancing through the house.

Phil was closing the heavy, sliding door of the shed and Billy had turned to see if his aid were needed. Dave and Paul had taken a dozen steps, perhaps, in the direction of the clubhouse porch. Their attention was arrested suddenly by a movement in the low undergrowth beside the drive just in advance. The next moment a coarsely dressed, heavy-browed and scowling man confronted them.

CHAPTER VII

ANOTHER STARTLING SURPRISE

If the Auto Boys were taken aback by their unexpected discovery of the strange man, and it is only natural to suppose they were, the fact remains that the scowling individual was even more confounded. He evidently had been far from expecting to see any person. Equally apparent was it also that he did not greatly fancy being seen himself.

“Hello?” the rarely abashed Mr. Jones managed to articulate; but his greeting, toned both as a question and surprised ejaculation, elicited no response. Indeed Paul might as well have saved his breath. The heavy-browed person had disappeared from view as suddenly as he had been discovered.

In the space of perhaps a second, during which the strange man had stood as if non-

plussed, looking with staring eyes from one to another, all four boys obtained a fairly good view of the fellow. They were sure he was no mere hunter or fisherman. There was too much of the tramp about him—his unkempt dress, unshaved face and shaggy hair suggesting this thought very strongly.

But why had he so quickly sought concealment? Was it because he had been spying on their movements and had no wish to be detected, the friends asked themselves; or was this stranger a trespasser who possibly had designs upon articles of property he might find in the vicinity?

“Let’s see where he got to so all-fired sudden!” exclaimed Paul when Phil and Billy had come close up. Jones’ courage was always good when all four chums were in close company. “He’s a real amiable looking neighbor,—*not!*”

“Catch me!” put in Billy quickly. “What do we care where he went? Just some prowler passing through the woods!”

"I guess tramps hardly wander so far from back porches and kitchen doors," observed Phil thoughtfully. "There's no railroad he might have dropped off much nearer than Staretta."

"And, believe me, tramps don't perambulate around over any twenty miles or so where chances of something to eat are so far apart," put in MacLester. "He's no tramp, and he has been watching us before now, *I'll bet.*"

"Funny the feeling a fellow gets!" declared Billy. "I'm plenty enough sure we have as good or better right on these old club grounds than that fellow, yet we all act like we had been caught headed toward a likely looking peach tree, but steered off in another direction when we found somebody had seen us. Are we going to have a look into the clubhouse or aren't we?"

"Well," said Phil Way slowly, for the question was directed almost personally to him, as such questions usually were,—"I hardly know *what* to say. We are not afraid to do it, if it

comes to that, but I'd rather not go too far until we know more about Mr. Dusty Rhodes, or whatever his name may be."

"Humph! More likely Mr. Wanted-by-the-Police!" muttered Paul.

Still undecided, the perplexed young gentlemen were moving slowly forward along the brush bordered drive. They came opposite the clubhouse and paused.

"Are we going in?" grinned Jones, a little sheepishly. He hoped Phil would say "yes." It is always easier to follow than to lead.

"You just keep your head on, Paul," answered Way. "There's no terrific hurry about it, anyway, I imagine. Looks quiet and peaceful enough, if that's any sign," he added, stepping forward to where he could get a view of the house above the screen of low brush near it. "Solemn as —"

Phil never completed the comparison. The others had followed him and all four boys were peering interestedly across the open space to-

ward the dusty, deserted porch, when they beheld a man in a gray outing suit of fashionable cut and wearing a golfing cap, come quickly out of the woods and slip stealthily into the house. He even took a long step,—almost a leap—over the sandy place beside the veranda steps, as if for the purpose of leaving no footprints there.

If the Golfing Gentleman had been in less of a hurry, had he been less occupied in avoiding the spots where the ground was bare and sandy, also had he looked behind him, as keenly as he looked from side to side, he would certainly have seen four very astonished faces. But if he waited until going inside to take a more complete survey of the immediate surroundings, the chances are that he saw nothing unusual. For with his favorite “Gee whiz!” Paul ran to cover and without knowing just why, his friends followed.

“This sure gets me!” spoke Jones in low, excited tones, “Might as well take *me* to some asylum right now!”

The chums had gone some distance into the woods, Paul leading the way. When he paused in his rapid walk, which he did, and faced about to speak, as has been stated, the others came likewise to a halt.

"Well, I think we *better!*" ejaculated Billy, witheringly, referring to the asylum Paul mentioned. "What in the world did you think was *after* you?"

"Hush up, Bill! We all of us hustled off as if we were pursued. It was a sort of panic, the thing was so unexpected," said Phil quickly but quite calmly.

"Certainly! May as well let ourselves down easy," Worth answered with a grin. "But what's next? I've been losing weight this day at a rate that will make me a living skeleton in a week!"

"The next thing," said Way with quiet determination, "is just this: We know now that someone's in the house and that he's the kind of a man that likely belongs to the Longknives

Club. They still own the clubhouse and have as much right to be here, I suppose, as we have. So far, so good! We're camping near by. We're just as good as the Longknives and probably no better. Result: we will just step up on the porch of the old house and knock, like any other civilized callers might do. We'll tell Mr. Longknife that there's a prowler around and he—he better take his playthings in at night, or *we're no judge*," Phil concluded with a smile.

"*Now you're on the pike!*" assented MacLester with emphasis. "We've been skidding from side to side and running back end to like a two-cylinder on wet clay. *Now* we stand a chance of getting somewhere—sifting something out of this conglomerated craziness!" With which bold language the intrepid David led the way back toward the clubhouse.

Phil walked on beside MacLester and Billy and Paul followed in single file, all four lads eager with excitement and the spirit of adventure. With an outward show of confidence

really greater than their innermost thoughts would have presented, they stepped on to the porch and Way's knuckles beat loudly upon the faded white door.

No answer coming to this and other and louder rappings, the boys walked around to the opposite door,—the one toward the lake. They made no effort to go quietly. Quite the contrary, their feet fell heavily upon the boards of pine. Anyone seeing them would not have supposed that their hearts beat hard or that they would rather have been almost any place than just where they were.

Still the loud footfalls, sounding really ghostly, and quite as if the noise came from the empty, black space beneath the porch, rather than outside, brought no notice from within. The repeated knocking upon the north door produced no better result.

It was impossible, the boys believed, that "Mr. Longknife" did not hear their summons. More than likely too, they thought, he had wit-

nessed their approach through some crack or window. The only conclusion possible was that he did not wish to receive callers and, also, desired to give the impression that no one was in the house.

“Hospitable,—very!” growled MacLester. “I was pretty sure we’d never gain anything by tramping over here. S’pose we can now drag ourselves back again.”

“Cheer up, cheer up, David, ‘the worst is yet to come,’ ” chirped Paul, quoting a facetious phrase he had heard somewhere. His lively spirits were quite restored now, but had he known how literally true his words would prove to be within the next few days, he would not have spoken them so carelessly.

By all the boys it was agreed that, since their neighbor showed so noticeably a wish to be let alone, their plan must be to pay no further attention to him. If the scowling individual was some friend of his, or even quite the contrary, it was no concern of theirs. They did resolve

that Link Fraley must be apprised of their discoveries and perhaps he could make something of the mystery. Meanwhile it would be foolish to worry—a very sensible decision under almost any circumstances.

The morning was gone and noon-time near when the friends reached their camp. By a circuitous route homeward they had taken a long walk along the gravel drive, thence through the woods. The air was heavy with the deep, fragrant scent of the pines, but close and warm. A swim in the lake, then dinner, then some plan of fortifying the camp against possible four-footed intruders at night, was the program.

Nothing unusual, nothing out of place in or about the shack was noticed as Paul and Billy raced to see who would be first into the water and, more leisurely, Dave and Phil followed them. It was fine sport diving off the old fishing boat. It was somewhat rough, perhaps, but fun notwithstanding, for Dave, Phil and Billy to tip the scow up till Jones was literally tumbled off into the water.

Only one thing was forbidden. Long distance swimming Capt. Way would not permit. There must be no taking of chances, away off here in strange waters, no risks incurred with nothing of the slightest consequence to gain and life itself to lose.

I said nothing unusual was observed about the camp before the swim in the lake. This statement should be modified. Phil did notice that a small sack of meal had fallen down, apparently, from a hook where it was hung on a post of the shelter. He supposed that in the excitement of their race Paul or Billy had caused the accident. Worth, also, had noticed it, and, usually, would have picked the sack up at once, but let it go, thinking Dave had knocked the bag down and probably would return it to its hook again later.

“Who spilled the meal?” Paul, however, demanded promptly when, as he was almost dressed, he discovered the fallen sack.

"Not I," came the answer from each of the other three in turn.

"How in the world did it happen then?" spoke Worth, wonderingly. Picking up the fallen bag he instantly made the discovery that the ten-pound sack was nearly empty. Nor was he any greater length of time in imparting this intelligence.

"And that's not all," cried Phil, who immediately began investigating further. "All the bacon is gone and,—how about the potatoes, Bill? How many did we have? There's not a half dozen left, and only a few apples here, too!"

Worth was sure there had been nearly a peck of potatoes and an equal quantity of apples. In real despair he carried the examination further. Any sort of interference with the camp larder or any of its stores always did upset Chef Billy greatly. In tones of grief and anxiety he announced that bread, cheese, crackers and coffee had also been taken.

"Not a thing else touched, that I can see," spoke Paul, making a hasty inventory of personal and company belongings that had been left about.

"Whoever it was, they didn't find the butter or the eggs and olives," cried Phil, who had hastened down to the water where these precious articles were kept cool in a covered bucket sunk in the wet sand. "It was the chap we saw over on the Point, I'm thinking."

More systematic and thorough search disclosed that several small articles of camp equipment as well as provisions had been stolen. A small stew pan, a butcher knife, a two-quart bucket that had contained sugar, also blankets from Dave's and Billy's bed were among the items missing. Considering that the friends aimed to carry with them a minimum of cooking utensils and baggage at all times, they felt very considerably their present loss.

"Bears at night and all kinds of other beasts around in the day time, to say nothing of a

crazy man hiding in an old house all by himself, for a neighbor—I should say we better *beat* it,” growled MacLester as if he really had thoughts of beating somebody, though it appeared that that was not exactly what he meant. For, “I say we better dig out! It’s a *hostile* country, I tell you!” added he.

“I don’t think we want to run away yet, do we?” spoke Phil quietly. “We’ll have dinner and talk things over.”

Billy was quite disconsolate over the loss from his stores but with a grin of resignation set about making coffee and boiling eggs. There was some bread left and, as he said he would stir up a johnny-cake for supper with the remainder of the meal, the noonday repast was quite satisfying. It was also invigorating, it would seem, for even David felt more cheerful afterward.

There was a great deal of discussion of the camp robbery and probable identity of the marauder, but at last the boys set about “re-

inforcing the outer walls of their position," as in military language Capt. Phil expressed it, with hearts almost as light as usual. They would make a trip to Staretta next day. Link Fraley's ideas on the question whether sneak thieves were or were not to be commonly expected in the woods would be valuable, to say nothing of other matters to be discussed with him. An early replenishment of supplies, also, was imperative.

"And we'll have a look at the country around the village," said Paul. "Why, we've hardly been in the car for about a week now!" and he brought his axe down with emphasis on the sapling he was chopping.

"That's right, too," assented Phil. "Give me a hand, here, Billy!"

Between them the two boys raised a heavy log on end to support additional walls for the house of poles. It was sunk to a depth of three feet in a hole previously dug for it, then earth was securely packed about its base.

The lower ends of all the poles, reaching from the ground to the ridge pole, and so forming the walls of the shelter, were sunk in the earth also. The front of the shack, heretofore wholly open, was enclosed with poles, likewise, with the exception of a narrow doorway, in the course of the afternoon's work.

Toward evening Paul and Dave went out in the boat, very certain that a mess of fish for supper would be caught in a short time. Billy and Phil remained to strengthen their crude house by fastening strong cross pieces in place to hold the upper ends of the poles securely. This finished, Worth washed his hands and rolled up his sleeves preparatory to engaging his culinary skill in the production of a johnny-cake while Philip rigged up a door by which the one entrance to the hut could be quite effectually closed if desired.

Several puncheons, or rough boards made by splitting good-sized saplings, nailed together by means of similar strips laid across them,

served his purpose nicely. Hinges, only, were needed to make the work complete.

"Isn't it dandy?" called the enthusiastic but perspiring captain to MacLester and Jones. The latter two had just beached the boat and were hastening up the bank.

"Well, by the old mush paddle! we *need* it all right!" cried Paul with vehemence. "This whole country's alive with pirates and bush-whackers, and desperadoes and I don't know what all! What d'ye think we *saw*? What d'ye *think*?—A fellow with his head bandaged up and his face all cut, sneaking along the shore down toward the Point. He dragged one foot like a lame chicken, till he saw us, then he lit out quick enough. He was watching the old clubhouse every minute—and the expression on his face! Why, he wasn't much older than any of us here, either!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE LATE LODGER'S STORY

Had the four boys yielded to their most lively impulse, after this day of startling discoveries, they would most assuredly have headed their machine toward Staretta with the determination of spending the night there.

They talked the subject over frankly enough. Fairly honest personally with themselves and with each other, they agreed that their real reason for driving to the town at just this time would be that they feared to stay in the woods.

“Then again,” reasoned Phil for at least the fifth or sixth time, “we are altogether too apt to imagine a lot of foolishness, being upset as we are by all the things that have happened. You can pretty nearly count on it that if we let our nerves get away from us just this once it will be harder to stay and face out any other

bad state of affairs that may have to be met another time."

The boys had finished supper and sat in lounging attitudes near the door of the hut. The campfire still presenting a fine bed of coals, though the cooking for the day was done, was just before them. From among the trees on the lake's western shore the last rays of the blood-red sunset cast a gentle, golden light across the water.

"Tell you what we'll do!" exclaimed Billy, suddenly tossing into the fire a bit of stick with which he had been jabbing holes in the ground. "Take a secret vote. Each fellow print his ticket,—so no one will know the writing—either 'go' or 'stay.' We'll go into the hut one at a time and put the votes into my old cap on the grub box in there. If the first vote is a tie, we'll do it all over again till there are three votes or more one way or another and that will decide it. And it will not be fair for anybody

to ask how another fellow voted or tell how he voted himself."

The novelty of the plan appealed to the others at once. Immediately it was carried into effect. One by one the boys went within the shelter and each printed a single word on a bit of paper, folded up the ballot and placed it in Worth's cap as suggested.

Very inquiringly was each face scrutinized by the companions outside as in turn Billy, Paul, David and Phil, in the order named, emerged from the house of poles. But if any one chap guessed, or believed he could guess, the word any other had printed, he kept his opinion strictly to himself. There was no comment,—scarcely a word spoken until Phil was chosen to bring the ballots out into the better light, there to read them and announce the result.

"One vote 'stay,' " announced Way, the first bit of paper unfolded. "Another, 'stay.' Still another, 'Stay,' and the last one,—'Stay,' again,

Rah for us!" said he heartily. "Guess we've got a little grit left, after all."

"Oh, this is a very *sandy* place," grinned Paul, digging his toes into the earth, which surely was of the character he named. "Anyhow I'm glad we all stand together. And now just for the fun of it, I'll tell you a little scheme we might work. 'Twon't be any trouble at all, hardly. We'll unscrew the electric horn from the car, tote the dry cells into the hut and wire the horn up to them. We can fasten it just at the door, and if we should hear anybody or anything prowling around in the night, we'll give 'em a blast on the horn that will curl their hair. Now *ain't it* a great scheme? *Am I* a wizard? I should *think I am!*"

Jones was so altogether delighted with his idea that he smiled his broadest smile,—and it was a pretty broad one. The other lads took kindly to the plan at once and Paul and Dave were soon putting into action the former's suggestion.

They fastened the noisy, shrieking signal firmly to the outer side of the post supporting the ridge pole at the front of the shelter. The wires,—there was an ample supply for all requirements in the tool box of the car—were then conducted to the battery of dry cells and to the push-button which Paul agreed to keep on or close beside his own bed.

Billy and Phil washed the supper dishes while this work was in progress, Worth insisting that Paul had suggested his contraption just to get out of the dish-washing job. But all the four were pleased with the result of MacLester's and Jones' combined efforts. Possibly they almost hoped some intruder, either two-footed or four-footed, thinking to be safe under cover of darkness, would visit their vicinity.

They were well convinced that such individual would depart rather more quickly than he came. "Would beat it like a house afire," Paul said; but that being, apparently, a very technical ex-

pression, it would require more space than I am willing to give, for its proper elucidation.

Perhaps there is no necessity, to say nothing of justification, for the reporting of the remark. Solemn duty compels the narrator, however, to tell the truth regardless of his own preferences. Even if Paul's words had been that the possible intruder would "certainly be so frightened that he would go away again immediately,"—which they very assuredly were not—they would have to be so recorded.

The early twilight had deepened and, piling wood on the bed of coals, the four friends gathered about the bright blaze feeling quite comfortable and secure. They tried to talk of other things but many times the conversation turned to the old house on the Point.

Who was the stranger in the golfing cap? Was it not possible that, for some reason, the Scowling Man and the Bandaged Boy were seeking him? The chums thought so. They thought, too, that among these three was the

person who had shared their provisions with them without the formality of having either invitation or permission.

The Bandaged Boy interested Paul a great deal. Long he speculated upon the possible identity of the youngster. Much he wondered concerning the injury that made the bandages necessary.

“It looked like only an old towel or something tied over his head,” said Jones, thoughtfully. “I’ll bet no doctor ever did such a job. If ever you’ve seen pictures of pirates with rags on their heads and their faces cut and bleeding, why you’ll know what this young fellow looked like—just exactly.”

“Yes, that is a pretty good description,” assented MacLester. “If he had only had an old cutlass in one hand and a pair of those boots with the flaring tops on his feet, he would have been, just as Paul says, the very picture of an old-time pirate, even if he was only a young chap.”

“We’ll see more of this mysterious business,—find out something about the queer mix-up, whatever it is, before we pull up stakes,” observed Phil in that thoughtful, rather serious manner so common to him. The others joined in saying they hoped so.

After awhile all four boys went down on the beach and stood for some time looking away toward the Point. But all was still and dark there and no light appeared for so much as a moment. It seemed almost oppressively quiet all about the lake and in the woods this evening. There was not a cloud in the sky. The stars looked as if each had brought some friend out, so numerous did they appear, shining down through the branches above, and over the lake and the dark mass of forest beyond.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
Way back in the woods so far,
Wouldn’t the gas tank be some sight,
To run so many lamps all night?”

Paul spoke the lines with that peculiar little self-complacent chuckle of his after a few minutes of silence on his part. "Poet!" he exclaimed. "I'm going to send some of my poetry to the papers!"

"If they don't send you to the home for the feeble-minded first," sniffed Dave. "I was tired before. Now I'm very tired and I'm going to bed," he added.

MacLester's example was speedily followed by the others. Jones was careful to see that the button for the electric horn was close beside him as he lay down. He proposed that the door of the hut be set in place and fastened from within but was overruled. The need of ventilation on so calm a night, with no wind to give the air circulation, was too great, Phil said.

Way offered to sleep nearest the door himself, and he did so. In a very little time, however, it mattered not at all, perhaps, who was or was not nearest the hut's entrance. Every

one of the lads was sleeping soundly, and David snoring tremendously.

Night covers many scenes of many kinds. Scenes of calm tranquillity beside home fires and hearthstones; scenes of rest and slumber while campfires burn low and lower in distant forest places; scenes of revelry and merry-making, scenes of danger, poverty and crime.

It was a scene of hard-faced, hard-living men and a large poorly furnished, poorly lighted room over which night had come, that must now be brought to the reader's knowledge. A scene of hard-faced men, I have said, and a poorly lighted room,—a bedroom of a cheap lodging house that stood not far from the great lumber mills of a Michigan city. The time was perhaps a week earlier than the arrival of the Auto Boys at Opal Lake. The hour was near midnight.

A low kerosene lamp placed in a bracket attached to the wall furnished what meager light there was in the cheap lodging room. It was just sufficient to show that of the eight or nine

cots ranged round the walls five were occupied.

All the lodgers were sleeping soundly, judging by the perfect quiet, except for heavy breathing and one man's snoring. Some had their faces fairly buried in the not exactly snow-white pillows. Others had drawn the sheets up about their heads. None wanted much covering it was evident, for the air of the room was close and foul. Even its single window was not open, and could not easily have been raised had anyone cared to try. The landlord down stairs had seen to that. No lodger of his would take French leave if he knew what was going on.

Heavy footsteps coming up the stairs disturbed none of the five who had retired earlier. Even when the footfalls entered the bedroom, making no little noise on the bare and dirty floor, there was no stir among any of the sleepers. The late comers,—there were two of them, hard-faced, coarsely garbed, rough men, used to rough work, rough living and a rough road

through life generally, sat down, each on the cot he was to occupy.

“Slider was stung, and that’s the long and short of it,” said one in low tones, as if continuing a conversation that had been started down stairs.

“Say that again! That gazabo drivin’ the hogs to market —” (this with reference to the man who was snoring) “makes so much racket I didn’t get it. Speak up, anyhow! These Indians are all sleepin’ like a bear crawled into its hole for winter; but what’s the odds?”

“No harm to anyone for all this lot might hear; still they could talk and stories are carried,—who knows where?”

“Well, go on about Slider! *Hang* this outfit!” exclaimed the other impatiently. “An’ ye needn’t think I’m asleep an’ not hearin’ of ye because I’m in bed.” Whereupon the speaker, having removed only his coat, shoes and trousers, lay back heavily and stretched himself between the sheets.

"I said Slider was stung," the first speaker began again. He put his great shoes down quietly, as he spoke. And although he pitched his voice that his friend could easily hear, it was evident from his manner that he had no wish to be heard by others. "How do I know Slider was left holdin' the bag? Because with his last breath he told me. I wish't he'd not gone off so quick; but he fell into a kind of dream an' that was the last of it.

"I was tellin' ye before," the speaker continued, having assured himself his companion was listening,—“that me an' Slider had never worked together till that day. He held one end of a big oak with a canthook. We was tryin' to roll her up on some skids. His hook slipped—somehow—I don't just know—an' he fell. The log rolled back on him an' I heard the crackin' of his chest like the snappin' of dry bean pods. He dozed off as good as dead before anyone came. I had got the log off'n him in no time, but it wa'n't no use.

“ ‘Ol’ man,’ says Slider to me, ‘listen.’ I had just got a coat under his head. Then he went on an’ told me that it was him that laid for that man Murky an’ got the twenty thousand dollars the fellow was bringin’ up to pay the men on that fool job at Opal Lake. He hid the dough,—leather case it was in, an’ all, till he could see the party that put him up to swipin’ it from Murky, an’ then divide. That was their bargain. So then, he met this gent later, but when they went for the twenty thousand it wa’n’t there. Slider was sure some sore. Yet he never thinks that the gent who got him to do the job on Murky had played him double.”

“ ‘Thar’s nothin’ crookeder than a crooked two-footed cuss, take that from me,” observed the one who listened. “Slam ahead!”

“Well, this party that Slider hooked up with was crooked *right!*” the other resumed, “if what Slider got was straight. What had he did but get Murky to lay for him, himself, along the road to Staretta an’ go through the *motions* of

robbin' him of the twenty thousand in his suitcase in the first place. Then he had got Slider to lay for Murky an' by some slick, quick work cabbage the boodle before Murky knowed what was happenin'. Next Slider hides the whole bag of stuff where the party had told him to leave it, and that's the last Slider ever seen of it. The gent had himself robbed, mind ye, then had Murky held up and the dough took away from him.

"Now I'm comin' to the main drive. Slider says to me he was sure the bag and the twenty thousand in it was still in the woods. He had got some wind of it. A Swede that worked on the road-makin' job started by that kidglove club had heard somethin',—seen somethin',—I don't know.

"Slider had in mind gettin' the twenty thousand all himself, an' bein' as so much time has passed, he figured he'd get away with it easy an'—But he went out of his head before he told me. Seemed to be half awake an' half dreamin'

but he never come out of it. He was dead next mornin'. An' you an' him was camp mates, one time, ye said? Well, nobody knows! If the crooked party hadn't flim-flammed him, he might 'a' been nabbed or som'thin', but ye can't help lookin' at it that Slider was stung, that's what he was, pore boy!"

"Tough!" came in muttered sleepy tones from the other bed. "Never would 'a' thunk it, Slider was that kind."

"Me an' him had a speakin' acquaintance—nothin' more. That day he got it we had happened onto the same job together."

A long deep sigh as if both great fatigue and sorrow were expressed in it was the only response. Quiet came to the ill-kept, overcrowded lodging room.

The lamp burned low and presently the landlord shuffled in and carried it away. Some time afterward there was a quiet, stealthy movement in the cot nearest those of the two late arrivals. One of the lodgers, it was evident, was awake.

How long he had been so was a question for until now he had made no sign.

Very quietly indeed did the wakeful person rise and dress himself. He carried his shoes to the stairway and put them on when half way down. Slipping through the dark, lower hall, he managed to get the door unbolted without noise. The first gray of dawn was visible above the mists hanging over the lake to the eastward.

A haggard, poorly fed boy—a lad of only seventeen at the most, though the hard lines of the hard life in lumber mills and lumber camps were in his face, the dim light showed this early rising lodger to be.

He shuddered once, as if with the cold of the chill night air, then hastened along the street, his shoulders drawn together like those of an old man.

Scarcely had the haggard youth disappeared from view when the door of the lodging house was again opened stealthily. This time a man of mature years emerged. His face was not a

pleasant one at any time but as he went slinking away in the same direction the boy had taken there was something particularly savage in his expression.

He came to a corner and paused; but if he had thought of turning he changed his mind after a keen look down the intersecting street, and quickening his slinking walk to a kind of rapid hobble, he hastened forward.

CHAPTER IX

OVER THE LONG ROAD

He of the savage expression did not slacken his speed until, coming near the business district of the town, he saw ahead the wretched boy who preceded him from the lodging house. The youngster had stopped before a bakery where some men were loading wagons with bread and buns, for early morning delivery to outlying dealers, it would appear.

For a little time the boy looked on hungrily. A driver spoke to him and threw him a biscuit. He would have paused to eat it but at this moment caught sight of the savage face that had come after him and almost at a run he hurried away.

If the man had any intention of following the boy he changed his mind when he saw a policeman, stick in hand, approaching from the same

direction. He drew himself together and relaxed his terrible frown. Now he looked like any other worker in the lumber camps and the officer gave him no attention.

“Go to it,” growled the man to himself when, now that the policeman had passed on, he could see the boy nowhere in sight. “Go to it!” Whereupon, apparently having changed entirely his plan to follow the ill-clad, ill-fed lad, he ambled into a saloon.

The proprietor of this establishment had either not yet turned out the lights of the night before or else had re-lighted them at a very early hour. Without a word, however, he served his customer and the latter having drunk, requested and was given permission to sit down by a smoky oil stove. This he did, huddling himself together in his chair.

“Go to it,” growled the man once more, and again quite ferociously, though beneath his breath. “If I’d a’ done what I’d ought to’ve done, I would’ve choked that Grandall low-lived

shark, same as I had a mind to do when I had the chanct. Blame *me*! An' to think," muttered Mr. Murky with an oath,—for such was the name of the savage-faced man—"To think I never did tumble to the trick before. Got me to pretend to rob him, he did, then had Slider bowl me over before I'd gone a mile an' wasn't lookin' fer nothin' to happen. An' the way he bawled me out for lettin' the bag get away from me! Even said he'd send me up, pretendin' to believe I was givin' him a raw deal so's not to have to whack up the boodle with him! An' him knowin' all the while that Slider had got the bag away from me fer he put him up to do it himself!"

The result of Mr. Murky's soliloquy and his contemplation of his misfortunes was that he worked himself into an even worse temper and general frame of mind than usual with him. He concluded his muttering with a burst of profanity so emphatic, that had Mr. Grandall, recent treasurer of the Longknives Club, been

present to hear it, he could scarcely have considered himself highly complimented. But if, on the other hand, he had gathered the impression that he was likely to suffer bodily injury should he and Murky ever meet, he would have been not far wrong, to say the least.

From heaping imprecations upon Grandall the much disgruntled Murky fell to asking himself what had made him think of that day of the robbery the moment he set eyes on the boy whom he met at the lodging house the night before. It was because the youth had about him something of the look of the man who had leaped upon him, beaten him and made off with the prize he had himself taken from Grandall, he concluded.

But, he reasoned, in his own rough mental processes, it may have been merely a coincidence. The fact, also, that the boy had risen and stolen away at an unusual hour, was no *certain* indication that he, too, had overheard the talk of the two late arrivals as he had at first supposed.

Still Mr. Murky could not well believe otherwise and his study of the situation ended in a second burst of wrath and indignation that now, when by a bit of unexpected luck he found he still had a chance of getting his hands once more on the princely sum of twenty thousand dollars, it was quite likely he would have competition in his laudable endeavors.

So thinking, Mr. Murky called himself some rather harsh names for allowing the haggard boy to get beyond his sight before finding out who he might be.

Having been engaged in putting his disreputable establishment in order, the proprietor of the saloon had given his early caller scant attention. But now he turned to him and in not very cordial language desired to be informed "how much heat a bo thought he ought to soak up with every drink he bought."

"Bo? Call me a bo?"—this being a professional term for tramp—"yer crazy, man!" declared Murky with an air of injury. "Ye'd be

surprised if ye knowed I'm worth twenty thousand dollars, boss! Well, I *am*! I'll have it all right an' I'm on the way to get it right now!"

The proprietor said he wanted no "guff" and that Mr. Murky would do well to be on his way with more haste, and he said it in a convincing manner.

Still with his injured air Murky shuffled out. The savage scowl his face habitually wore was blacker, if possible, than ever. He would have been a dangerous man, undoubtedly, had his courage in crime and wickedness equaled his thoughts and desires.

Murky was a long way from Staretta, but he knew the road. Even before that village was on the map he had worked in the logging camps of that section. He was acquainted with the holdings of nearly all the large lumber interests in Michigan. Winter after winter his work had been in the woods. But he would never spend another season in the cold and drifts, he vowed to himself, planning how he should reach Opal

Lake. And he was right. Never again were Murky's unwilling feet to drag their way through the forest snows.

The lank young man whose poorly fed and hungry appearance had gained for him the compassion of the bakery driver, found early opportunity to eat the biscuit thrown to him. He stood over a grating in the sidewalk. Some heat from a cellar below found its way up through and he was glad to have what little addition it furnished to his comfort.

Like Murky, the boy was deep in thought; but he did not mumble and mutter to himself as the other had done. He did not scowl and grow angry as his late fellow lodger did. Quite the contrary, his face wore a most forlorn and sorrowful expression. If there were not tears in his eyes now, there lately had been, for both were red and swollen. All in all he was a most wretched object as he stood munching the bun, his scant and dirty clothing hanging upon his thin frame as on a scarecrow.

Grief and pain are the orphan's lot under any circumstances; but when to the depths of sorrow and loneliness that only an orphan can feel there are added a sudden knowledge of a guilty secret and fear of consequences such as only over-wrought imaginations can picture, the condition is pitiable indeed. Such was the unhappy situation of Chip Slider.

To the little town that father and son called home they had brought the woodsman's crushed body. Some neighbors had given their assistance and there was a decent funeral service and burial. But when all was over the boy was left quite to himself. He was so used to this, no one thought much about him, apparently. Ever since his mother died he had been his father's housekeeper when the elder Slider was at home, and he had stayed quite alone when the father was away.

Chip had been accustomed to supporting himself, to a considerable extent, by doing odd jobs for people of the village; but such a means of

livelihood in a hamlet is precarious. Money is apt to be scarce and boys apt to be plentiful. Also, the lawns aren't mowed every week and the ashes go into the road. Slider, Sr., had kept his son from absolute want, but that was about all. He had been, presumably, a hard-working man but not always a sober one.

That his father had been other than honest, despite his certain faults, Chip had not known or suspected. He was only painfully aware that his last real friend on earth had been suddenly taken from him, and what he had since learned was a result of his decision that he must go where work was to be had.

He had turned over to the owner the key to the two-room pine cabin that had been home to him, promising some day to pay the rent, long overdue. Then he struck out for the lumber districts. He could get work in the logging camps as winter approached if he could but reach the headquarters of such employers.

In this manner was it then, that Chip Slider,

footsore and well-nigh penniless, one evening reached a lakeport town not far from the scene of his father's death. He was glad to find a cheap lodging house and a bed. Even the heavy-faced man who watched him, frowning savagely, and later followed him when he went up stairs, had not disturbed him a great deal. Too tired was he to take notice or try to think what the scowling fellow found in him to attract attention.

"Slider was stung!" The words of the late-comer in the lodging room had awakened Chip instantly. But he did not stir. With eyes closed, though tears trickled from them, he lay very quiet and heard the story of the unknown man—the very man who was with his father as death approached.

Just what later impelled him to rise and steal away from the rest he so sorely needed, it would have been hard for Chip to say. Fear was one incentive. He was afraid to be recognized—afraid the stranger whose voice he heard, might

say, with daylight's coming, "Why, that's Slider's boy, now! That's the son of the fellow who stole twenty thousand dollars, and let it slip away from him!"

Hope was another factor, possibly, in Chip's subconscious calculations. He wished so much that he might, in some way or another—he had little notion just how—gain the knowledge that had died with his father concerning the hiding place of the stolen fortune. He thought he would be able to reason out the whole problem, perhaps, when daylight came.

He would be up and ready, anyway, and he would not run the risk of being accused of a robbery about which he had never before heard one word. That he might be, if he remained where these two men would see him, he had no doubt.

Poor Chip Slider! Daylight brought him no relief. Also he had seen again the scowling face that so steadily eyed him the evening before. Why should this man follow him from the lodg-

ing house? Did he suspect him—believe he knew about the robbery? Maybe the man was himself a robber?

“Must be he don’t see good if he thinks I’ve got anything worth stealing,” Chip reflected.

He had finished his biscuit now and the food was helping his courage climb up to normal. It helped him decide that, since Opal Lake and Staretta, of both of which he had heard, lay in the direction of the lumber camps he desired to reach, he would go there. He would make such guarded inquiries as he could.

No one would know him. The robbery had taken place three years ago he knew, for he remembered every word of all he had overheard. Few people would remember the crime or think anything about it. Then if he should get some clue to the hiding place of the treasure, might he not find it? He would try! Determination big and strong, the kind that is not easily discouraged, grew suddenly to a complete mastery in Chip’s mind. He would find that stolen

money if he could. Then he would—ah, but he must *find* it first.

The day was warm enough when once the sun was well risen. Chip's new resolution was strengthened thereby and taking heart, he applied at different stores and shops for work. He wished to earn money to take him on up toward the logging camps, he said. But no one wanted a boy for just a few days. He would be gone before he had learned to be of any real use, they told him. Possibly it was just a way of dismissing him—an excuse, for certainly poor Slider was a sorry looking applicant for even the most common labor.

“Right smart ways to Staretta,” said a man in a farm wagon, to whom in desperation Chip had applied for a job. “Walking’s purty good though!” he added with a grin. “Right out this street and straight ahead. You’ll make it in two or three days if you’re real spry.”

The man smiled in a not very pleasant way, Chip thought. A tramp of one hundred miles

or so might appear funny to him, but certainly not to the one who must do the tramping. But still, "out this street and straight ahead," kept ringing in the boy's thoughts. "You'll make it in two or three days if you're real spry." These words also Chip repeated to himself. Then the thought, why not, came to him. Possibly the idea would have entered his head sooner if the subject of something to eat had not kept itself so constantly in his mind.

Accustomed to doing for himself, though not in the least accustomed to traveling or being among strangers, young Mr. Slider headed for the open country. He would find roasting ears in some cornfield if he could get no other food, he hoped. He would sleep by some haystack, also, when night came on. This would save him twenty cents—the price of a lodging house bed—at least.

It often does happen that when one has finally determined upon a course of action and started resolutely to follow such course, that a

surprisingly large number of helpful things are met with. Life is not all difficulty and obstacles by any means.

And this did Chip discover. Barely had he reached the city's outskirts when a woman driving a horse and wagon overtook him. She asked if he would ride. He was very glad to accept the invitation.

Possibly it was the forlorn look in the boy's eyes that excited the woman's interest and sympathy, but at any rate she quickly found out something of her passenger's history. She had been to market with chickens and vegetables and having had a long drive was provided with a lunch. She had already eaten all she wished and offered the remainder of her bread and butter and cold baked beans to her passenger.

So was Chip helped on his way and fed when he least expected it. When the kind woman drove into the yard of a small farm house he was nearly ten miles upon his way. Before he was permitted to go farther, also, he was sup-

plied with more bread and butter and some cookies. And when night came the young wayfarer did find, as he had hoped to find, a stack of new hay not far from the road and not near any house.

CHAPTER X

THE MAN AT THE OLD HOUSE

If during the night, when the Auto Boys had gone to sleep in their reinforced quarters, there came either two-footed or four-footed creature prowling near, such visitor was not heard. But just at dawn there occurred a very great disturbance.

B-r-r-r-r-r! The electric horn let go a terrific blast. Dave MacLester was awakened in an instant. He sprang out of bed and in the semi-darkness of the lodge groped wildly for his trousers.

“What the dickens is it?” cried Billy Worth, also awakened and trying his best to collect his senses, while the shriek of the horn still rang and kept on ringing—a noisy, discordant scream. “Get the gun!” he muttered in a loud

undertone, quite convinced that someone was trying to break into the shack.

Phil was also stirring at once. Quickly he crept to the narrow door of the lodge and looked out. Only Paul remained oblivious to the horn's frightful clatter.

"What you doing, Jones?" demanding Way, seeing nothing whatever outside save the gray mists and the vanishing night,—the lake dark and still, the trunks of the great trees just discernable against the open expanse over the water—"What you tooting the horn for, anyway?"

At the mention of his name Paul sprang up. "Waking me up out of a sound sleep!" he grumbled. "What's the matter with all you fellows?"

The horn was still now; but in the darkness of the lodge it was yet difficult to discover what had occasioned all the uproar. Billy Worth was first to understand it.

"Why, you, Jones!" he almost yelled.

“What do you think of it, fellows? The little beast was lying on the button. No wonder there was a racket!”

“Gee whiz!” It was all Paul could say, but over his face came that expansive grin which always served to soften one’s feelings toward him. And even if his companions could not see his smile they felt its influence in his tones. MacLester, himself, forgot to scold for once, saying only,—

“I knew that fixing the horn up in such a way was all foolishness.”

Of course he had known nothing of the kind. It was merely his *way* to imagine he had an earlier conviction that some sort of trouble would be experienced.

The horn quite naturally had stopped its din, when, in rising partially up in bed, Paul took his weight off the button onto which he had chanced to turn; and now that the disturbance was explained, Jones lay back in his bunk and drew the covers snugly up to his chin again. He was

the only one who had not moved about sufficiently to overcome his drowsiness.

"I'm not going to bed again. It's just about daylight," said Phil, stepping out of the lodge. He was still in his nightclothes, but not for long. With a rush and a little yell he sprang out of night shirt and made a dive for the water. "This is *fine!*" he called and Dave and Billy, suddenly enthusing, followed him.

"Where's Paul? Not out of bed yet?" asked Worth, after swimming and splashing for some time, and answering his own question he ran up the bank, calling Way and MacLester to follow.

Jones was still asleep. Without warning or a moment's hesitation Billy seized his feet and Phil and Dave took each an arm. In five seconds poor Paul was on his way to the water.

"Say! you Indians!" he gasped, just beginning to realize what was happening. But a mocking laugh was the only answer.

It took Paul but a second to guess the intentions of his captors, yet he would have wriggled

in vain had not Phil, walking backward, chanced to stumble over a bit of higher ground.

Way sat down both unexpectedly and quickly. He lost hold of Jones' arm and the latter by a quick turn freed himself from Billy and Dave and sprang to his feet. But Worth was after him instantly.

In desperation Paul rushed toward the lake. For only a moment he paused upon the end of a projecting log, then just before Worth or Dave, both in hot pursuit, could seize him, he made a bold dive.

Head foremost, nightshirt and all, Jones went into the water, an exultant little yell telling of his satisfaction that at least he had not been thrown in.

Gasping, but with his own glowing grin illuminating his freckled face, he came up. So quickly, too, did he begin to dash water on the bare skins of Dave and Billy, still on the bank, that they were glad to follow him into the lake.

“Let's see if there are any fresh bear

tracks," said David, presently, but Phil proposed breakfast instead, and sent MacLester and Jones to gather some dry wood while he kindled the fire.

All in all the chance tooting of the electric horn had helped to start the day off so briskly and at so early an hour that Paul took a great deal of credit to himself. He said he was "no wizard," and that he guessed he was a "very poor alarm clock" several times during breakfast.

"There can be no question at all but what Jones ought to have been thrown into the lake instead of being merely forced to jump in," remarked Phil. "Still, all things considered, it is a good thing we're up in good season. We can get to town bright and early, if we're going?"

"Going? Why, we've got to go!" put in Billy quickly. "We need all kinds of things to eat. But we can't *all* go. Someone will have to stay

and watch camp or we may have not even the beds left when we come back.”

Undoubtedly Worth was right. In view of the theft that had taken place and the probability that at least two, and no one knew how many more, rough characters were still somewhere in the vicinity, it would be unwise to leave the camp unoccupied for any considerable time. The discussion ended in Phil volunteering to remain on guard. He would have a good time by himself, he said, in starting the building of a raft that had been contemplated for some time.

In reward for staying at home Phil was chosen to try for some fish to be carried to Nels Anderson's cabin and he asked Paul to accompany him. The two went out in the boat while Billy and Dave busied themselves with putting the camp in order and getting the car ready.

Catching fish in Opal Lake was a simple matter at any time. There was a species of pike that “all but climbed into the boat themselves,”

if Paul's statement was correct, and the bass and perch were also plentiful though more wary.

An hour's time, therefore, gave the two early fishermen a dozen pike and five or six good-sized bass, not counting a number of small fish thrown back. The two boys reached shore again just as Dave completed the task of restoring the horn to its place on the car and Billy was writing a list of supplies to be purchased.

That the fish might be kept cool and fresh, and so better serve the purpose of a peace offering to the Andersons, they were packed in clean, green leaves sprinkled with water.

"We ought to get something for all our pains," Paul remarked. He was thinking of fresh eggs and milk. But Phil, having information concerning the mystery of the old clubhouse in mind, answered:

"If Anderson will talk only a little now, he will tell us still more when he knows us better. And you fellows must tell Fraley everything we

have seen. Most of all tell him about the man who went into the house; for it may be there's more back of all this queer business than we even imagine."

Worth took the wheel of the car and Paul the seat beside him. Dave had already started the engine and stepped into the tonneau. On low speed and easily, the Thirty threaded its way among the trees as the trail led in and out for a little way before emerging into the straight path of the narrow road.

With a sigh Phil realized that he was alone and his first act was to step down on the beach to scan the Point. But he saw no sign of life there,—no smoke rising from the chimney of the old house.

"All right, then," he thought. "I'm not going to look for anybody again, myself, and if anyone wants to see me, why, here I am." So he took the axe and began a search for likely timber for raft building. He wanted sticks four or five inches in diameter and perhaps eight feet

in length, he decided. Individually these would be easily handled, while collectively a score of them would easily support, when in the water, the weight of all four boys.

The morning grew close and hot as the sun advanced and Phil speedily found his task a warm one. But in cutting wood in Gleason's Ravine, as those of you who have read "The Auto Boys" will recall, he had learned to handle an axe right skilfully and now his work made good progress. He was hopeful of having all the material for a raft ready by the time Billy and the others returned.

If the morning was warm there where Phil worked under the trees and beside the tinkling ripples of the lake, how much more so was it out under the sun where his three friends made their way along the forest road! With the Thirty's top laid back and windshield down the motion of the car made driving pleasant, but when they stopped in Nels Anderson's little

clearing the boys were painfully aware of the dry, parching heat.

Anderson himself appeared in the door of his homely, unpainted house directly the car came to a stop. He did not speak but his manner was far from cordial as he looked out inquiringly.

Undaunted, Paul was on the ground in a moment. Dave passed out to him the box of fish and boldly Jones marched up the path across the weedy, sun-baked dooryard.

"Hello!" said Paul, confidently. "We just stopped on the way to town to leave some fish for you,—nice fish—fresh caught—Opal Lake—nice fish."

The cause of Jones' sudden loss of confidence and consequent inability to use his tongue as glibly as usual, was a gesture that looked like decided hostility on the part of the big Swede. He threw both arms out before him.

"Nice fish," protested Paul in tones meant to be friendly, but really more frightened, instead. "Caught in Opal Lake."

A little girl came quickly to the door and a woman followed. Paul repeated, "Nice fish."

"Oh, goody!" the little girl, a child of nine, exclaimed. "We ain't had none for ever so long."

"We have no money, child!" the woman said to the girl, then would have spoken to Jones, but he put in quickly:

"Gee whiz! We don't want any *pay* for 'em! Just thought you'd like some, maybe, as we had to come by here to town, anyway. *Nice fish! See?*" he added, diving a hand under the moist leaves and bringing up a twenty-ounce bass.

Well, it was very, very kind of the boys, the woman said, in substance. The fish would be very acceptable, indeed. Fresh meat of any kind was so scarce in summer, except in the towns. They might get fish for themselves, Mrs. Anderson went on to say, but Nels was able to use his arms hardly at all now. They had been growing worse all summer.

As his wife spoke thus, the giant Swede threw

his hands out suddenly as he had done before. Paul saw then that the big fellow meant only to show that he had very little strength of his arms remaining. He got the impression, and it was probably the truth, that Anderson wished him to know that he was crippled and that such was the reason for his being at home like a woman when he might otherwise have been doing as much of the hard work of the clearings and the woods as any man could do.

Jones asked if he might have a drink of water, thinking it would give him the opportunity for more extended conversation. Mrs. Anderson brought him a half filled cup. The well was nearly dry, she explained, and water was not plentiful; still she hoped she never would be placed in the predicament of refusing so small a request. Then Nels Anderson spoke for almost the first time.

There was great need of rain, he said. The woods would soon be like tinder and the boys must be on their guard. If ever a forest fire

occurred the flames would go to the very edge of Opal Lake, leaving them without a camp and possibly without means of getting out of the wilderness even if they should succeed in saving themselves in their boat on the water.

Billy gave a short, low blast on the Thirty's horn at this juncture, as if warning Paul that he had tarried long enough, but Jones waited to say: "Yes, sir! There might be danger of fire in the woods with all the bad actors there are around. We've seen two mighty tough looking fellows and we've seen another strange man at the old clubhouse."

Anderson glanced quickly toward his wife, but did not answer. "Da ban waitin' on ye, maybe," the woman suggested significantly, nodding toward the car. She again said in her kindly but broken English, that all the family would enjoy the fish, and Paul was forced to say his reluctant "good-bye."

"If you'd have kept the old horn still I'd have got some pretty important information,

I'll bet," said young Mr. Jones with his usual assurance, when he had related the net result of his talk with the Andersons.

"Oh, we heard you—heard you say 'nice fish' and that's about all we *did* hear," laughed Billy.

"Hump! I s'pose I should have started right off with, 'Now, Nels Anderson, you tell me all about those chaps hanging around the clubhouse, if you please,' shouldn't I? That would have been fine diplomacy now, wouldn't it?" demanded Jones with an air of injury. "How did *I* know the man wouldn't fall on me? Why, he's big as a house!"

But Worth and MacLester only laughed and not that day nor for a long time did Paul hear the last of "nice fish—nice fish."

Nevertheless Jones had made a good start toward gaining the Andersons' confidence, as subsequent events will show. He had learned nothing the sadly, disabled husband might have told him, nor did any of the lads guess how much the

big fellow knew of the three mysterious men. Had they done so they would have realized that Anderson himself no doubt surmised a reason for their wishing to cultivate his acquaintance.

It was fortunate the boys found Link Fraley more communicative than Nels Anderson or they would have had very meager intelligence for Phil when they returned. Still, all that Fraley knew was much less than they were able to tell him in regard to the common mystery.

“There’s a rumor around that the man Grindall has been pitched out of the bank he was in,” said Mr. Fraley, leaning for a moment on the nail-puller in his hand.

The boys had found him in a back room opening a case of new goods. He was glad to talk with them but, as usual, wanted to go on with his work at the same time. “Rumor an’ nothin’ else amounts to about as much as a sulphur match in a gale o’ wind,” he continued. “But in this particular case I happen to know that a travelin’ man,—a drummer,—who was up here

told it about Grandall for a fact that he had been found out to be crooked. Everybody supposed, anyhow, this fellow said, that that was the reason he quit workin' in the bank, and I should say most likely that whoever made the guess was *real warm*, as the sayin' is, at any rate."

"So the chap at the clubhouse may be Grandall," suggested MacLester interestedly.

"Not that I know of, for what would the other two fellows you told about be doin' there?" replied Fraley. "Grandall wasn't no common crook and he didn't keep company with that kind. Looks to me as if your neighbors up there most likely belong to a different crowd entirely with no more right on the Point than you would have. The Longknives fellows wasn't the kind that would hook grub from your camp."

A lengthy conversation failed to persuade Mr. Fraley that anything more important than poaching or hunting out of season was going on in the neighborhood of Opal Lake. He cau-

tioned the boys about leaving anything of value unguarded in their camp, but also suggested that unless they themselves were ready to leave the lake, they better not set too many inquiries on foot. If the sheriff and the game wardens heard what was suspected it might make trouble.

“But just the same,” MacLester asserted confidently, “I’ll bet the man at the old house is Grandall and the two toughs we saw have come here to meet him to plan some crooked work somewhere.”

The lads were homeward bound, now. In the tonneau there were provisions for a good dinner, a fine large watermelon included. Paul Jones, at the wheel, was giving the Thirty a wide throttle.

CHAPTER XI

PAUL HAS A LIVELY ADVENTURE

It was Saturday afternoon and a time for general preparations for Sunday in the camp by Opal Lake. Yet it was a time for a relaxation from the week's stirring activities, too, and the Auto Boys were not disposed to hurry. They lounged comfortably about the camp when the noonday meal was over.

Possibly they all felt the influence of habit in thus making the afternoon of Saturday a less busy time than usual in their camp affairs. At home they would have been occupied with school or other work of some kind during all the earlier part of the week; but here in the woods Saturday might have been quite the same as any other day. And yet the lads did not so regard it. Perhaps it was quite as well they did not. Cer-

tainly they had been stirring pretty constantly since their arrival at the lake.

The news and events of the day had been quite fully discussed during the hearty dinner that followed the return of Billy, Paul and Dave from Staretta. Phil's work with the building of the raft had received, also, all necessary attention, including praise, criticism and suggestion. The talk had progressed to plans for the following day.

"If we can't all of us go out in the machine, let's none of us go," proposed Phil. "If someone must stay to guard camp, let us all stay. We can have a good time just resting."

"I'll keep camp. You fellows take the car where you like," Paul volunteered. In turn then Billy and Dave each offered to do the same, but in the end all were glad to plan as Captain Way proposed.

The result was that Phil lay down to take a nap, Paul and Billy played ball down on the narrow beach, and Dave occupied himself

with,—Jones called it a “laundry.” So successful was he, indeed, in his washing of socks and handkerchiefs that Paul insisted it was “exactly the one laundry he desired to patronize.”

Strange as it may seem, Mr. MacLester's establishment was not soliciting patronage. In fact the proprietor positively refused to have “P. Jones, Esquire,” as that young gentleman introduced himself, or anyone else, as a customer. Whereupon P. Jones persuaded William Worth to give up baseball to go into the laundry business jointly on their own account.

Their venture was highly successful. Phil Way moved his eyes drowsily when he awoke to what was going on. Mightily pleased with the idea he, likewise, embarked in the cleansing enterprise.

Once a good idea is launched, no one knows whence it may lead. From washing of socks and handkerchiefs the boys fell to a general scrubbing up of other belongings. It all ended

in an overhauling of the automobile. Every dusty or greasy rag was cleansed. Top curtains, long under the rear seat and unused, were taken out and brushed. Even the tire chains, carried for emergency, were washed as was the shining brass of the steering column.

It was in the midst of these operations that Paul discovered an almost forgotten spark plug in a little used compartment of the tool box. The porcelain was broken but a new part was wrapped in the same paper. He proposed to replace the damaged portion at once and would have done so but could not hold the plug securely to unscrew its parts without a vise.

"Let it go. We have enough other plugs perfectly good," suggested Phil. Jones was inclined to do so, but he kept thinking of the vise in the garage of the clubhouse. However, he said nothing about this at the time.

With everything about the camp in apple-pie order, Billy and Phil rowed out in the scow to get fish for supper. Dave settled himself in

his clean clothes, ready for Sunday, "comfortable as a fly on the butter," he said, with an old newspaper to read. Paul had joined him but only for a few seconds. He was "too fidgety," he said, to sit still.

The probabilities are that young Mr. Jones was still thinking of mending the broken spark plug. He sauntered into the woods and coming, as if by chance, to the gravel road, followed it on toward the Point. "No harm in looking around some," thought he, then further said, quite confidentially to himself, that he would, if he found the coast entirely clear, feel quite safe in returning next morning to replace that broken porcelain.

Very slowly did Paul go forward when he had come at last to where he could see the old house plainly. Everything seemed so very quiet his softest footfalls sounded to him as if they might be heard across the lake. Still, like a magnet, his curiosity drew him forward.

"Why, there's nobody around! There's

nothing to be afraid of. I honestly believe that whoever it was that we saw the other day—Grandall, or anybody—they're gone now." So did Jones give his hesitating feet encouragement. He stood at last just at the end of the path, the clubhouse porch directly before him.

"Nobody here. Not a soul around." Again Paul sought to reassure himself; but he was forced to smile in a grim way as in his thoughts he added, "Gee whiz! but wouldn't I leg it though, if that tramp fellow should jump out from somewhere!"

The door of the clubhouse,—the door that led into the general living-room, Paul knew,—stood slightly ajar. The boy had not observed the fact at once. When he did make the discovery a deep desire to look inside seized him. Still he hesitated, glancing anxiously in all directions.

"Thunder!" exclaimed young Mr. Jones, quite impatient with himself, "I'll go up and knock." Before his resolution should fail him he marched quickly forward, though still care-

ful to step lightly. The soft clatter of his shoes upon the porch gave him great alarm but he applied his knuckles to the door-frame, though very gently.

“What’s the use of being scared?—actually knocking as if I was afraid some one *might* hear me,” grinned Jones, suddenly realizing the absurdity of his quiet tapping. The thought made him bolder and he rapped more vigorously, this time upon the panel of the door itself.

Not in the least remarkable is it that the already slightly open door swung wider open. Quite possibly Paul would have been disappointed had it failed, under his lusty knocking, to do so. But still there came no response. He could see into all the front part of the large living-room now. For the first time a sense of guilt stole over him, for he found himself terribly tempted to step inside.

The appearance of the large, main room of the house was unchanged since he had first seen it, Jones noticed. The same long-empty,

deserted look was everywhere. Even the atmosphere had an odor, or at least gave some feeling, of unbroken loneliness.

Phil Way wouldn't like this sort of thing. He would never consent to entering the old house if there was so much as a sign of its being occupied, Paul reflected. Nevertheless, reasoning with his better nature and his conscience that he would touch nothing—harm nothing, the all too curious lad stepped within.

Although near sundown, there was still abundant daylight out of doors. Inside the shadows were deeper. All was quiet. For a few seconds the young intruder simply looked about him. Then he ventured to approach the old fireplace. There were cigar ashes on the floor and a half-burned match lay on the mantel.

"Somebody's been here and it may be they're coming back, after all, or the door wouldn't have been left open," the boy reflected, beginning to use his brains more intelligently than at first. Nevertheless he tiptoed to a door that he

thought might open on the stairway to the floor above.

The door came open easily as he lifted a latch but he saw steps going down, not up. The cellar was below. He wondered if there would be any harm in seeing what it was like. It would take but a second, he was sure. The light was very dim, but he would go down the steps just far enough to look around, then hurry away.

At the instant Paul entered the cellarway he heard footsteps on the porch outside. In a panic of excitement and fear he pulled the door shut behind him. And there he stood in utter darkness at the top of a flight of steps leading down,—down—he knew not where.

A first desperate impulse of the over-curious P. Jones "Esq.," was to leap down the stairs and run. Some thought that he was pursued gave rise to the hasty inclination. Luckily he got his senses sufficiently together in time to avert so foolish a movement. His brain was in

a whirl. His heart beating hard and fast, he stood still and listened. What would he not have given to be out of this predicament! The perspiration broke out all over him. He scarcely breathed lest he be heard.

The footsteps in the clubhouse living-room fell softly but with a rough, shuffling sound. One might easily guess that the newcomer did not have light footwear. The impression seized upon Paul that the visitor was none other than the savage-faced man. Possibly the terrible fellow had been prowling near and had seen him enter the house, he thought. Not seeing him at once, the man would make search, Paul felt very sure, and he nerved himself to dodge and make a quick dash for liberty should his door be opened.

After a little time all sounds from the living-room ceased. The excessive quiet that followed coupled with the thick darkness in the cellar-way were almost more terrifying to poor Jones than the noise of the man moving about had

been. He was quite certain the fellow was listening for some movement or maybe for the very breathing of the one he had certainly seen to enter the house. So thinking, Paul tried to breathe even more lightly than before, stifling his lungs till they all but cried out for air.

Still no sound from the living-room. Possibly the man had gone away. Paul scarcely dared to entertain the hope, but it was almost instantly dispelled, anyway, by a sudden thought that likely the terrible, scowling face was in hiding just outside the door with awful hands waiting to seize him when he should try at last to slip out unseen.

Although the time seemed hours to Jones it probably was no more than a few minutes that elapsed before, most unexpectedly, a murmur of voices reached his ears. Try as he would, however, he could distinguish no one tone or catch a single distinct word. He had an impression that two men were speaking, but could

not be sure; also felt that they were standing or sitting at the opposite side of the living-room.

“Eef I got every cent oof dem twanty t’ousand dollars, my arms be still no good!”

It was the voice of Nels Anderson. Even Paul could not mistake it. His amazement was great and the more so as he caught the pronounced note of both pleading and protest in the giant Swede’s tones. Was Anderson asking for money? Was it really the thieving Grandall to whom he was speaking?

Intently the boy in the dark cellarway applied himself to catch the response to Anderson’s words. He heard nothing but a confused murmur. Even the voice of the Swede he could not distinguish again or hear one syllable apart from the confused jumble of undertones.

Jones was greatly relieved to think he was probably in no danger of falling into the hands of the savage-faced man; but quite satisfied now that Grandall, the dishonest treasurer of the Longknives, was just beyond the opposite

side of the cellar door, he was still far from comfortable. And where had Grandall been hiding? That was another question.

For Paul was certain he had heard but one pair of feet upon the porch and but one person shuffling about the living-room. If Grandall had been concealed inside the house, had he seen the young gentleman who entered the cellar-way? The decidedly agitated young person referred to ardently wished he knew.

There came a shuffling of feet again. The murmur of voices ceased or passed beyond Paul's hearing. The footsteps seemed to move toward the outer door, and soon their sound died away. Perfect quiet of a few minutes was followed by a rustling of some papers and a clinking noise such as a spoon and cup might make.

"Oh, goodness me! I wish I had never got into such a trap!" Jones groaned within himself.

Escape, somehow, he must. It would be pitch

dark out of doors, by this time, and that would be in his favor. Yet the darkness and his absence would cause great uneasiness in camp, he knew. He must manage to gain his freedom before his friends should go searching for him—coming even to the clubhouse to inquire, perhaps.

With a kind of desperate resolve to do or die, Paul began a slow descent of the steep cellar stairs. In the total darkness he could do no better than blindly grope from one narrow step to the next. Even when he could discover no more steps and knew by kneeling down that he had reached the earthen floor, he could but ask himself which way to turn. Painfully he went feeling his way here and there. At last, when after hopelessly losing himself, he was unable to locate so much as the stairway again, despair seized him. There would have been tears in his eyes in another moment.

But instead there came a great ray of hope to his heart. He discovered the dim outlines

of a low, narrow window. It was but the work of a few seconds to grope cautiously among sundry boxes and shelves to the slight patch of brighter hue. The window was easily within his reach also, and, fortunately, fastened by a small hook only. Three minutes later Paul was out of the cellar and into the great, big comfortable out-of-doors again.

With a thankful little prayer in his heart, though an exultant and rather vain kind of feeling was there also, as he thought of the zest with which his friends would hear of his great adventure, Jones hastened cautiously through the brush-grown yard of the clubhouse. He kept close under the shadows of the bushes as he came to the path to the gravel drive. Then to make sure his way was clear before venturing into the more open road, he dropped down and crept forward on hands and knees.

Hastening noiselessly onward in this way Paul had just satisfied himself there was no one anywhere about—assured himself that Nels

Anderson was far upon his road homeward ere now, when his hands fell upon the arms of a man, the bare fore-arm of some person stretched out on the ground where the path and roadway met.

CHAPTER XII

ANOTHER TRAVELER ON THE ROAD

Chip Slider burrowed into the haystack whose friendly situation offered him shelter for the night and soon fell asleep. By starting feet foremost and wriggling backward under and into the loose outer edge of the hay, just above the ground, he had covered himself almost completely. His face was left exposed, enabling him to breathe freely and with the sweet, wholesome scent of the meadow lulling all his senses to rest he forgot the long day and his troubles.

With morning's coming Master Slider made good his own name by sliding out of his burrow, feeling much rested and none the worse in any respect by reason of his feet having been higher than his head all night. Indeed it is doubtful if he so much as noticed the trivial

circumstance. He did remark to himself that he was hungry; but this being a condition to which he was quite accustomed he accepted the fact as being as much a part of his everyday existence as the ragged condition of his clothes or his own unhappy thought.

The most pathetic feature in all Chip's reflections, perhaps, was his wondering if there might not be cheerfulness and brightness in the world some place; if there were not friendly voices and gentleness, peace and plenty somewhere if sometime he could find them.

The boy's doubt of the existence of any other sort of life than the hard way in which he had always lived, his wondering if love, friendship and enough to eat came to people only in dreams, he had kept always to himself. There being few people to whom he felt free to talk at all, and none to whom he could speak in a confiding manner, he naturally had never mentioned to anyone the questions that puzzled him.

Slider's own observations with regard to friendship or kindness being any considerable part of the every-day life of anyone, were of a decidedly negative character. There was not much prospect, either, that they would be otherwise in his present situation.

The world judges by appearances. Where Phil Way, for instance, would have found the best the place afforded instantly offered him, had he asked for a glass of milk at a farm house, Chip Slider would have received not even the "pleasant look" one sometimes hears spoken of.

There were exceptions even for Chip. The woman returning from market had been one of them. Another came to his relief when he was just ready to faint from hunger. Near noon of this second day of his journey toward Staretta he was taken in by a farmer's wife and given a hot dinner—all he could eat of boiled beef, boiled potatoes, cabbage and bread and butter.

He had not asked at every house. After each time he was coldly received it took quite a while to collect his courage to apply at another place. He had been unable thus far to find roasting ears or other food he had hoped to gather in the fields.

Still, making his way steadily though painfully and slowly, Chip managed for three days to keep his face headed toward the north—toward Staretta and Opal Lake. The second night he slept in a log sheep barn. He was very cold, for though there was some straw to lie upon, there was not enough to cover him. Also, as he drew his knees quite up to his chin in a painful endeavor to keep warm, he had been disturbed by a dog's loud barking. He was forced to barricade the tumble-down door of the shed with loose boards for fear of the noisy creature.

Very lucky, Chip considered himself, when on the third night of his travels he came again to a stack of hay quite removed from the

farmer's barns and dwelling. He had lately passed through a considerable village. There he had spent nearly all of the little money he had remaining for dried beef and ginger cakes—an odd enough combination, but yet the things the youth had chosen as he looked up and down the grocer's shelves and counters to determine what he most wanted and of what he could get the most for his outlay.

It was not yet quite dark when Chip settled himself on the ground, stretched his tired legs in front of him and leaned his back most comfortably against the stack of hay. With great relish he contemplated his paper of dried meat and the ginger cakes and would have eaten greedily but for his wish to make his supper last as long as possible. The air was still warm, he was very tired, and when he had finished eating he lay back against the hay and dreamily closed his eyes.

Little wonder is it that Slider fell asleep. The paper whereon he had spread his supper

still lay on his lap. A small portion of the meat and cakes remained—something for breakfast, the boy had thought, resisting his inclination to eat all.

But Chip was destined in this instance to be none the gainer by his provident plan. As he slept, there approached from the road, quite as he had done, another person to whom the shelter of the haystack looked good. This individual was a man with slouching manner, a stooped figure and a scowling, savage face. Yet he smiled, if the frightful grin that parted his lips could be called by so pleasant a name, when suddenly he beheld the boy.

Chip had gone partially around the stack to seat himself and the newcomer had not discovered him, therefore, until he started to do the same. In the fading light the latter seemed for a moment not to recognize the young gentleman who had already pre-empted the premises—but only for a moment.

Then it was that the hideous look of pleasure

came to his unshaved and unwashed face. For a few seconds he looked at the sleeping boy with the most delighted interest, reflecting, apparently, as to whether he should wake him or not. Several times his expression changed from a grin to a scowl and back again. At last the really frightful smile predominated and the man seated himself heavily beside the unconscious Slider.

It is hardly necessary, I suppose, to state that the new arrival at the haystack was Mr. Murky. And with what you already know of that very agreeable person, it will be quite superfluous to say that, when he had seated himself, his next act was to proceed with the finishing of Chip's meager supper. It was with a truly fiendish relish, indeed, that Murky devoured the food,—not that he enjoyed dried beef and ginger cakes so much, but that he was hugely pleased with the manner of obtaining them.

Not until he had swallowed the last crumb

of all Slider had saved did the genial Mr. Murky make his presence known to Chip. The latter was made aware of having company by receiving, suddenly, a violent push from the visitor's open hand against his cheek. Sleepily the boy straightened up, for the shoving palm of Murky had toppled him over. In another second, however, he discovered what and who had awakened him. With an only half-suppressed, frightened cry he sprang to his feet.

"What do you foller me for? I ain't got nothin' you want!" cried Slider, indignantly. "I never done anything to you!"

"Aw, cut it!" answered Mr. Murky, more quietly and in tones he intended should be friendly. "Set down here! I ain't a-goin' to hurt ye. Don't happen that ye have to have a hull stack o' hay to yerself, I hope!"

Still Chip stood off a few feet, distrustfully. He ventured no response to the invitation so cordially extended him and Murky continued:

"Ain't us both travelers on the road? Sure,

I et yer supper, but ye don't care, do ye? Blame *me!* I ain't had more'n two bites in two days. Cut the monkey business now. I want to tell ye suthin."

Slider showed less hesitancy but still stood aloof. His inclination was to run away. He was afraid of this dirty, heavy-faced man. In spite of the fellow's apparently friendly manner he doubted him. Still, he thought, he would sit down. There would be no harm in hearing what the man had to say. After awhile he would slip away and leave him. Never would he fall asleep in such company.

As Chip sat down he was careful to get as far away from Mr. Murky as he really dared to do; but the latter edged himself nearer. Leaning over, he placed one dirty, brown hand familiarly upon the boy's knee, and with a questioning mixture of his terrible scowl and his no less frightful grin he said: "Slider was stung, wa'n't he?"

The lad shrank back from the man's inquiring gaze but made no answer.

"Slider was stung," Murky continued, as if deciding he must answer his own question. "But I want you to tell me about it. Him an' me was great friends. He was a-goin' to have me help him get a lot of money he had comin' to him. An' now he's done for! Blame *me*! if I could do any friend o' his'n a good turn I'd be only too glad to do it. If it was to walk forty miles, or if it was to bump my head into a cannon ball to see if I could stop it,—I would just about do it, I would!"

Still distrustful, still afraid of the evil appearing fellow despite the most friendly feeling he vowed he had for him who was gone, Chip yielded his confidence, notwithstanding.

"Him you speak of was my own father," the boy said simply. "But," he went on, as Murky appeared to expect him to do, "I don't know anything about what you said first—anything about him being 'stung,' like you said."

"Maybe," said Chip, after quite a long and thoughtful pause, "maybe them two men that talked about Slider getting left after he had did what he hadn't orter have did in gettin' some money somewhere—maybe they was talkin' about some other man happenin' to be of the same name."

"Ferget it!" growled Mr. Murky. Then more pleasantly, "If anybody at all can help ye to find them twenty thousand plunks, I'm yer huckleberry, right here! An' so Slider was yer own father! Blame *me*! I'm goin' to help ye if I kin. I'm goin' to help my poor ol' friend that's dead an' gone's boy, I am."

Little by little poor, timid Chip Slider yielded to the wheedling talk of Mr. Murky. Because he was afraid, he told some things and still more he told because some delusion led him to hope, though his own better judgment counselled otherwise, that this scowling fellow might, after all, be anxious to do him a kindness. But not once did he suspect, as the man drew piece-

meal information from him, who Murky really was. He thought only that if his would-be friend was deceiving him, it was but for the purpose of prying into a secret that did not directly concern him.

Darkness had come on. The warmth of the hay invited him and the sympathetic Murky declared his intention of "hittin' the feathers." In other words, he was ready to retire for the night. Burrowing into the edge of the stack, he pillowed his head upon one arm and almost instantly, or so it seemed to Chip, he fell asleep.

The boy sat for a long time deeply pondering. He was sorry his solitude had been thus disturbed, sorry he had spoken so freely to the disagreeable stranger. He felt, rather than actually realized, that all was not right and that he was in danger.

Once or twice the tired and worried Slider walked cautiously around the hay stack. It was very dark now. At the distant farm house a dog was barking. From somewhere far away

in another direction there came a chorus of deep-throated cries of other dogs as if in answer. Possibly these disquieting sounds as well as his own great weariness helped Chip to decide to make his bed where he was. He chose a place quite removed from the man whose friendship he both doubted and feared to have, and lay down.

Mr. Murky awoke Chip soon after daylight by dragging him forcibly from his nest. In tones that put a threat into the command he bade the boy go to the farm dwelling for a "hand-out."

In the vernacular of the Murky type of humanity, any food obtained at kitchen doors in such form that it can be carried away to be eaten elsewhere is a "hand-out."

And it was a "hand-out" that Murky wanted. He told Chip he would see what would happen if he "put his feet under the table" and brought nothing back. By which he meant that if Slider accepted an invitation into the kitchen for his

own breakfast, and returned with nothing for him, he would, perhaps, very much better have gone hungry.

Remembering the dog he had heard barking in the night, Chip was very reluctant to obey Mr. Murky's order. He spent some time adjusting his clothing, pulled very much awry by being slept in, and made no answer to the older man's command.

"Beat it!" growled Mr. Murky with real ferocity in both voice and manner, "Hear me?"

Slider heard but did not move. Murky seized him. With one hand grasping the boy's shoulder, the other clasping his thick, uncombed hair, the tramp gave the poor lad a most violent shaking, or rather, a rapid yanking forward and back as far as his arms could reach.

"Beat it! Blame *me!*" howled Murky, relinquishing Chip only when he was quite out of breath, "Blame *me!* An' after me tellin' ye the good friends me an' yer father was! You get some grub now an' you get it quick! An' if

you don't fetch nuthin'—well! What ye've jest had ain't a circumstance to what ye'll get—ain't a circumstance! Blame *me!*”

There really could be little doubt that Chip was already *blaming* Mr. Murky for several things, none of which lightened the burden of his troubles; but he was too frightened now to offer resistance. Vengeance was in his heart, though, and he set off toward the farm house very grudgingly indeed.

The “get even” instinct is especially strong in the minds of uneducated people. They have little capacity for reasoning or to reach sound conclusions if they attempt to reason. They cannot comprehend the actual, scientific truth that they themselves suffer by harboring vengeful thoughts.

To “get even” was the subject uppermost in Chip Slider's mind. His first thought was that he would slip away and not return to the haystack, leaving Murky waiting. Then the idea came to him that he might send the farmer,

whose house he was approaching, to set his dog on the man. But these and other plans the boy finally abandoned. He was afraid.

The mistress of the farm house looked upon the applicant at her kitchen door with little favor; but she gave Chip two huge slices of bread and butter, placed one on the other, like a sandwich. With such timidity did he then ask for more, that her sympathy was aroused.

"Bless you! You shall have all you *want!* Come in," she said.

Thereby did Slider obtain quite a substantial breakfast. It helped him forget about getting even with Murky and he returned to that refined and polished gentleman, carrying the bread and butter to him.

And the latter, being very refined and genteel, indeed, rewarded his young friend by saying: "Blame *me!* but you're slow! *You'd* walk the plank if I was a pirate, that's what *you* would, an' I hope to see ye do it some day as 'tis! *You* look too much like your dad, *you* do!"

Mr. Murky was evidently thinking of the twenty thousand dollars taken from him by Slider Senior.

If thoughts of getting even still came to Chip's mind he did not show them; but if he was thinking that some day the hatefulness and violence displayed by Murky would *lead inevitably* to just the reward they *deserved*, he was right—absolutely right.

CHAPTER XIII

THE OPAL LAKE TREASURE

Mr. Murky ate the bread and butter Chip brought with much satisfaction despite his ill-temper. He drew the back of his hand across his mouth a couple of times, as he finished, and demanded to know in what direction Slider was traveling.

The boy would gladly have had Murky state first the direction in which he meant to go, that he might announce his own intention of going the opposite way. The question asked him was sharp and pointed, however, and he could only answer that he wished to reach Staretta.

“Blame *me!* You’s lookin’ fer them twenty thousand bones!” harshly ejaculated Murky. “That’s what’s the matter! Blame *me!*”

And then since Slider made no denial but stood meekly by in silence, the savage fellow

continued, but less harshly, "Course! I knowed you was after the boodle yer daddy was horn swaggled out of! Didn't I give you every chance to tell me about it last night? Why didn't ye tell me *all* about it? If you don't know jest where to look, say so! Didn't I say I'd *help* ye?"

Chip faintly acknowledged that he did not know just where to look for the treasure. He hoped, he said, to gain some clue to its possible whereabouts,—some information to work upon, by making guarded inquiries at Staretta. He had said as much the night before, he declared, which really was the truth.

Perhaps Mr. Murky still suspected the boy was holding back important knowledge of the prize they both were bent on finding. At any rate he repeatedly returned to the subject as the two walked forward along the dry and dusty road. Always he appeared to have forgotten what Chip had said about it all before. Again and again he tried to trap his unwilling com-

panion into some admission that he had not told all he knew.

Under the frequent bursts of Murky's violent language and many times repeated questions the unhappy Slider chafed more and more. He resolved that, come what might, he would rid himself of so undesirable a companion at the first opportunity. He resented the man's insolence and tyranny, hated him for his ugly manner and moreover was deeply ashamed to have anyone see him in the company of so great a ruffian.

By begging for food at the isolated farm houses Chip at last satisfied the hunger of his fellow traveler. The latter grumbled a great deal no matter what the boy obtained at the different dwellings approached, and he growled in still more ugly temper when Slider came back empty-handed. Yet, as has been said, the brutish fellow's want of food was at last fulfilled and after drinking copiously at a well

beside a barn he proposed that both should rest.

The day had come on hot and close. Even the forest trees showed in their dusty foliage their exceeding need of rain, but they offered shade from the burning sun. Beneath a great oak some distance forward, where a growth of uncut grass afforded a bed, the man lay down. Chip sat close to the tree, his weary back leaned restfully against it. He, too, would have wished to stretch himself on the ground but he had other plans in view.

“Lay down, here!” commanded Murky. He might have been speaking to a dog, so hateful was his manner.

“I’m restin’ real good right here,” Slider answered quietly. He looked away up and down the dusty road beside which the oak stood. The country was becoming more and more thinly settled, he observed. The houses were poorer and smaller. Clearings of considerable extent were few and the well-ordered farms had

given way to stump-dotted fields, with fences made of stumps rather than rails or wire.

It was not a very pleasant part of the country in which to travel alone, Chip reflected; but he was quite sure he would rather be alone than in some company he could mention. So he glanced sidewise many times, watching Murky, trying to discover if he really slept or was merely lying still with his eyes closed.

"Fergit it!" cried Murky angrily, suddenly sitting up.

Slider had not spoken, nor had he moved.

"Blame *me!* You was thinkin' of givin' me the slip, *you* was!" the very amiable Mr. Murky growled. "Jest you try it on!"

Chip made no reply. From his actions—his perfect silence—one would have supposed he had not heard. He still looked away off along the brown road. Murky glared at him but he answered not by so much as a glance.

After a long time, when the tramp had lain down again, Chip ventured to rise and quietly

walk about. There was no fence separating the roadway from the adjoining woods and he strolled on a little way among the pines and birches. Often he looked back as he moved here and there, to where Murky lay, prepared at any moment to return casually to him, quite as if he had had no thought of going more than a few steps.

Thus by degrees did the wary Slider pass quite out of view from the big oak. A thrill of excitement and fear combined ran through him, but with firm resolve he started off as fast as he could run. For a long distance, a mile or two, perhaps, though he thought it several times as far, Chip kept up his fastest speed. Carefully he kept under cover of the trees yet near enough the road that he could not lose his way.

Venturing stealthily into the open highway Slider was much relieved to find no sign of his late companion. Then at a rapid walk he hastened on. All the rest of the long, hot day

he traveled so. Hungry and thirsty almost beyond endurance, the saliva thick and sticky in his parched throat and mouth, he yet would not pause for food or drink. Surely the none too energetic Murky would find it a task to overtake him.

When night came on Chip applied at a lonely cabin for his supper, offering to pay the few cents he had left. A man had answered to his knock—a man who now looked the tired, dirty boy over curiously, but quite kindly asked him to come in. He showed Chip a wash basin and a pump, saying, “You get busy with ’em. I’ll see what’s here. Bachelor’s halls is mostly pretty poor pickin’.”

The man, though gruff, was kind. He set out cold beans and corn bread from a cupboard and poured warm coffee from a pot on the stove. He had but lately eaten his own supper, apparently.

Having drunk freely and washed his dusty hands and face, Chip sat down to the meal be-

fore him with a most restful sigh. All the while he ate the man of the house sat opposite, smoking a big, black pipe but seldom looking toward him.

At last, when he had eaten all he quite dared to do, for he really feared to take as much as he wished of either beans or bread, lest he be robbing his host, Slider ventured to say that he must be moving on.

The man asked him if he would not rather stop for the night. Chip thought he would and said so in a timid, wistful way that made his host smile.

It was a genial, cheery smile that shone in the midst of the tobacco smoke. The boy felt that it did him as much good as the supper he had just eaten, and very likely such was the case.

Quite encouraged, Chip told the man something about Murky and his wish to avoid him. There would be no danger of "Murkeys or Turkeys or anything of that kind around his

shack," the host answered, and so making progress with their conversation the two became quite well acquainted.

Slider fell asleep on a straw mattress upon the floor, thinking that in the morning he would tell this pleasing friend he had found just why he was anxious to reach Staretta. Possibly the man could tell him something about the twenty thousand dollars. Gladly would he divide the money with so kind a person if ever he could find it.

Well pleased with this idea, Chip thought even better of it when he awoke in the morning. With engaging frankness he told his host at breakfast what he hoped to find and that he would like him to share in the treasure.

The man laughed slightly; but he recalled at once the robbery to which the boy referred. He did not think, he said, that there was much probability of the stolen money being still secreted in the woods, but that if such might be the case, quite likely the treasure was con-

cealed somewhere in the Opal Lake neighborhood.

Of one thing he was certain, and he told Chip as much—the man whom the boy wished to escape was none other than he who had had a part in the robbery—the man named Murky.

Much disturbed by this information, but more hopeful than he had yet been—hopeful that he could repay the kindness of this man who had treated him so hospitably—hopeful that he could find the lost twenty thousand dollars, restore the money to rightful owners and so clear the guilt from his father's name, Slider took to the road.

Just how he was going to divide the fortune with Mr. Gruff-and-Kindness and at the same time give the prize over to those who should have it, he did not stop to consider. It is one of Hope's ways not to ask too many questions in detail.

Slider reached Staretta late in the afternoon, following a hard day of hurrying forward. Often he ran. Always he made good progress,

thinking that he would gain perhaps a full day ahead of Murky.

Just how to proceed in his search, now that he had come to the neighborhood of the robbery, Chip could not quite decide. But he went out among the lumber yards where he felt more at home than elsewhere and sat down. The smell of the fresh sawdust, the hum of the machinery were like meeting old friends for he had often been around the sawmills near his home.

A laborer leaving the yards after his day's work saw the boy and spoke to him. Chip said, at first, that he was looking for a job. Then the mill man spoke so encouragingly the lad made bold to say he was hungry and that he had no place to stay for the night. It all ended by Chip going home with the good-natured fellow. Here, again, he told confidentially of the search he wished to make. His new friend laughed at him and told him about the old clubhouse at the lake and how to reach it.

Still bent on gaining some definite informa-

tion as to where possibly the twenty thousand dollars might be hidden, Slider spent the following day around the different Staretta mills. Also he desired to accumulate at least a small supply of food. He knew the woods near the lake would afford him nothing, or scarcely more than a few berries at most.

He succeeded better in collecting provisions, however, than in obtaining useful information. Many a "hand-out," as Mr. Murky would have said, had he hidden away in an empty shed near one of the mills when at night he went there to sleep.

Teamsters of the yards had been accustomed to feed their horses in the shed Chip chose for his lodging place. They had left some hay there. It made a quite comfortable bed for the wayfarer, though he did feel very lonely indeed when all sounds of activity about the mill and the town had ceased.

So did he fall asleep. So was he sleeping when there crept into the shed another way-

farer also intending to spend the night there.

The newcomer heard Slider's breathing but not being able to see whom he might be, struck a match.

"Blame *me!*" The words came in a subdued gasp of both astonishment and delight. "Blame *me!*" ejaculated Mr. Murky again—for that most pleasant person the new arrival was—"What d'ye know about it?"

Mr. Murky was so surprised he hardly knew what to do, it would seem,—hardly knew how to answer his own question, which he repeated at least four or five times—"What d'ye *know* about it?" But at last he lay down quietly on the hay quite near the sleeping boy. An ugly chuckle was repeated several times—it sounded as if it might be the answer to his question—and then he fell asleep.

Habit and long practice in sleeping "with one eye open," as he would have said, caused the scowling Murky to awaken the moment

Slider stirred. The first peep of daylight made objects in the shed dimly visible.

Chip sat up, shivered and rubbed his eyes. Murky sat up at the same time. With an exclamation, the boy recognized the savage face so near him and sprang to his feet. Throwing one foot suddenly out Murky tripped him as he would have started to run away.

"Blame *me!* You *will*, will ye?" demanded the tramp harshly. "But I know *your* tribe! They can come it over me onct, but not more'n onct. Yer a fine sneakin' son of yer robbin', plunderin' father!"

Before Chip could rise to his feet Murky was standing over him glowering as a wild beast might do. He had grabbed up a broken barrel stave which he flourished in the most threatening manner.

"You leave me alone," Slider managed to say, his temper fired and ready to fight.

"Blame *me!* 'You leave me alone,' " the vicious fellow mimicked. "*I'll* leave you alone!

Sure! I'll leave you alone! Tryin' to beat me to it to find the twenty thousand plunks, was ye? Take that, then! and that and that! An' if I ever ketch ye on the road again—if I ever hear of ye buttin' in on my huntin' fer that money yer thievin' dad robbed me of, I'll knock yer brains out—an' you take it from me!"

With fierce, rapid blows the tramp beat his wretched victim over the head with the broken stave—beat him till the blood ran from a dozen cuts and bruises. "I'll *learn* ye to leave what's mine be! Jest you stay off'n my road, nuther on ahead, nor follerin' behind, but stay *off'n it*, I tell ye."

Murky's always savage face was doubly savage now. He threw his weapon down with an oath. A hasty glance assured him that Slider, though dazed and painfully hurt, was still conscious, and he slouched away.

Chip made no effort to rise until his assailant had passed beyond his hearing. When he did sit up and wipe the blood from his face he

moaned pitiably. Tears of rage and anguish coursed through the crimson stains on his cheeks and temples. Truly he was a most sorry spectacle.

But if Mr. Murky thought he had persuaded Slider to abandon the search for the Opal Lake treasure he was never more mistaken in his life. If anything, he had but strengthened the boy's determination.

For the notion Murky entertained that the money was rightfully his, was not Chip's idea of it at all. If there was one person in the world who had no claim upon the prize, that person, in the lad's mind, was Murky, and he was willing to endure a great deal to keep the savage fellow from obtaining it, even though he might not get it for himself.

With this thought in mind the sadly tattered young gentleman considered notifying the police, or whoever the law's officials in a little town like Staretta might be, and causing

Murky's arrest. But, he reflected further, the time when he should have done that had passed. Now, such action on his part would be attributed to spite. Perhaps he would only get himself into trouble.

Quite alarmed as the thought came to him that in his present plight he might be arrested for fighting or as a suspicious person, Chip resolved to quit the town before anyone was astir. Broad daylight had come now. Soon men would be on their way to work. Gathering up his supply of provisions, he waited only long enough to tie up his bruised and battered head with some cotton cloths the teamsters had left, after making harness pads, perhaps, and then set forth.

This, then, was the boy Paul Jones and Dave MacLester had seen along the shore of the lake not far from the old house on the Point, and not very far from their own camp.

Needless to say, also, Murky was the man

whose savage expression had frightened all the boys somewhat, that morning they caught a glimpse of him among the bushes close to the gravel road.

CHAPTER XIV

A STRANGER IN THE CAMP

Thoughts of both the scowling fellow and the boy with the bandaged head flashed upon the mind of Paul Jones when, following his escape from the cellar of the old house, he suddenly found himself in personal contact with some creature hiding in the bushes.

Equally quickly he thought of Nels Anderson and the man in the golfing cap. Still quicker than his thought, however, it is quite unnecessary, perhaps, to state, was Paul's movement in taking his hand away from the person he found himself touching.

"Blame *me!* Who the blazes —"

But that was all young Mr. Jones heard. Further words were spoken and though they were in an undertone the voice was so deep and harsh that Paul could hardly have missed

them had he been present. The fact is, however, he did not wait. Like a frightened deer he sped away down the gravel road.

No need was there for Paul to ask whom it might be that he had met so unexpectedly under the dark shadows of the brush. The voice had told him plainly enough. It fitted so precisely with the picture of the savage-faced man, still fresh in his mind, that he could not be more certain had he seen the person in broad daylight.

As Paul ran, he followed for some distance the more open space of the roadway. Direction mattered little to him. He wanted only to place distance between himself and the immediate surroundings of the old house. Quite out of breath, at last, he paused and looked back. No one was coming on behind, he was sure. The darkness was not so deep here in the partial clearing and he could distinguish near-by objects quite clearly.

His composure somewhat restored, Jones

turned directly into the woods to make a short cut to the camp. As he did so a slender figure darted out stealthily from behind a great tree directly before him. Instantly the person stooped to conceal himself, but Jones' quick glance had noted the sudden movement and he recognized him who made it.

Remarkable as it may appear, the truth remains that had Paul gone a few feet more or a few feet less before turning off from the gravel road the person whose stealthy action he discovered would have escaped him. That is, he had paused at the exact spot where the person was hiding.

Strange as it may appear, too, Jones was not frightened. Perhaps he was past the point where he easily felt the sensation of fear—unexpected things having come to him so rapidly in the last hour or two—and he was conscious only of a merely indifferent curiosity.

“You look here, now!”

Paul meant only to add that persons prowling

around the woods at night were putting themselves in danger of being shot at in mistake for wild animals, or the like, and his voice was sharp with protest; but even as he spoke the thought that he, himself, was and had been lurking among the shadows quite as this other boy was doing, came to him.

The oddity of the situation—a lot of people stealing about here and there in the darkness, quite overwhelmed him. His quick, “You look here, now!” was followed with a laugh, in consequence.

I have taken pains to analyze Jones' feelings and so make clear to you by what sort of process his laugh was produced under circumstances when laughing would certainly not be expected, because of the effect that followed. If Paul, speaking somewhat harshly, had gone on to say, “You'll get shot, prowling around this way!” or, “What do you mean, sneaking around in the dark? Looking for another camp to rob?” subsequent events would have been quite dif-

ferent. Chip Slider's life, it is quite possible, —even probable—was saved because Paul Jones laughed.

“What'll I look at?” came a voice out of the darkness in answer to Jones' command. For Slider's first impulse, which was to run and to hide, was arrested by the friendly inflection the laugh put into the words addressed to him. It reminded him of the gruff but good-natured fellow by whom he was given a lodging. Surely an honest, hearty laugh is a sign of friendliness. Whoever heard of a very wicked person laughing really mirthfully or pleasantly?

“At your watch, I s'pose, if you want to see what time it is,” was Paul's pert and not exactly civil answer to Slider's question. Then he laughed again and added quickly, “But look a' here, as the sayin' is, ain't you the same chap we saw down along the lake? I know you *are* without asking, for that matter. You had your head all tied up!”

“Mebbe you seen somebody else, too, then,”

Slider answered. "Mebbe you seen a man with an old black hat an' a brown coat an' a look about as pleasant as a crosscut saw? An' if ye've seen him, tell me when."

"Gee whiz! he's the one I almost fell over a little while ago! The same old villain! Did *he* beat you up?" Paul asked, guessing as if by intuition that such was the case. He felt sympathy for the strange boy, and wondered—wondered to hear the note of defiance yet of pleading and supplication in his voice.

"'Tain't because he beat me an' said he'd kill me, but he ain't got no right here," was Chip's protesting answer. "He's after some money, Murky is, that don't belong to him. That's his name—Murky."

By this time Jones had approached close to the bushes beside which Slider had sought to hide. The latter still knelt on one knee and on the other his arms rested while he regarded Paul attentively.

"Where d'ye stay?" asked Jones.

"Here."

"But where?—where do you sleep and where do you eat?"

"Ain't got much left to eat. There's blueberries in the swamp, but it's too far to go tonight."

"Hungry?" asked Paul.

"Some."

"We've got a shack overe here by the lake. That's where I'm going. Give you your supper if you want to come along. I'm 'way late and must be hurryin'."

"I knowed where *you* belonged when ye came runnin' after me," Chip replied. "I've seen your camp—you an' some other fellers."

"We must be hustlin' right along," Paul urged, remembering more intently how long he had been gone. "Gee whiz!"

He did not explain what prompted his exclamation but it was the sudden thought of how very much had followed his chance visit to the

old house. At once he set out at a brisk little trot, telling Slider, "If I tucker you out, just holler, but our fellows will be half crazy to know what's become of me."

Finding his way by simply heading in the general direction of the camp, then keeping to that course though he had constantly many trees and occasionally a thicket to dodge, Jones led forward briskly. Suddenly a long, penetrating shriek broke upon the stillness of the woods. Another and another followed. The sounds were indeed terrifying.

"What—what is it?" asked Chip hoarsely. Both boys had paused. Slider was undeniably frightened and made no pretense of concealing the fact.

"Nothing to be afraid of. Only our automobile horn," Jones answered. "But something must have happened! There's something wrong, I'll bet anything!" and he bounded away again, Slider following.

It was but a few minutes until Paul rushed

into camp, to his amazement finding Billy and Phil each with an oil lamp from the automobile in his hands while Dave was just in the act of lighting the camp lantern.

“Paul Jones! Where *have* you been?” demanded Way, his voice pitched far higher than it often was. “We’ve —”

“Gee whiz! What’s happened?” Jones cried. “What you got all the lamps going for? Why are you blowing the horn so like all-get-out?”

“Why, to signal to you and to go hunting for *you*, you rabbit!” said Billy Worth, right briskly. “I don’t think it was very smart of you to go chasing off without saying a word, then stay away half the night.”

There was real irritation in Worth’s voice. Paul felt it and realized that he probably had been the cause of no little uneasiness, all due to carelessness on his part.

“I know it, Bill,” he spoke quickly and humbly. “On the level I—but wait till you hear what’s happened! And see who’s here! This

chap and I picked each other up right in the dark!"

Slider had been hanging back at the outer edge of the camp's lighted circle. Noting Paul's reference to himself, he bashfully stepped forward.

"I'm hungry, and so's he," Jones went on confidently, but in most friendly tones. "Shake hands here, fellows. This is the chap we saw with his head tied up. The old hyena we caught sight of near the clubhouse that day pretty nearly murdered him."

Phil Way was the first to step up and make Chip Slider welcome. He asked no questions, but quietly introduced Dave MacLester and Billy, then suggested that if the visitor would like to wash up before eating, there was a bucket of water beside the basin on the bench yonder.

Slider was more backward among the Auto Boys, by far, than when with the men of the sawmills,—the people with whose ways he was

more familiar; but he could not long feel ill at ease when all the lads showed him every kindness, acting as if his being with them was the most natural thing in the world, and in time he found himself even laughing,—a thing he had not done for a long, long time, to say the least.

Once he was fairly into the lighted circle of the auto lamps and the campfire, Chip's deplorable condition astonished even Paul and Dave who had seen him before. The bandages were gone from his head now, but the deep cuts and bruises Murky inflicted were still to be seen on his face and forehead. His ragged, ill-fitting clothes were more ragged than ever after his wild life in the forest. His efforts to keep himself clean had also succeeded but poorly.

Chip ate heartily when he and Paul sat down to supper alone, for the others had eaten long before. Jones always had a good appetite but now he "overloaded his stomach,"—at least so he declared confidentially afterward—to give

the visitor every encouragement to eat all he wished. The way the baked potatoes, fried fish, warmed over johnny-cake, cheese and coffee disappeared, in consequence, was quite extraordinary, if not really record-breaking.

"I ain't had nothin' warm for a good many days—years, it seems like," said Slider as if in apology, as he permitted Billy to fill his tin cup with coffee for the third time. And that was the beginning of a conversation that lasted far into the night.

His ravenous hunger satisfied, his mind somewhat at peace and his body really at rest for the first time in a good while, it took no persuasion, no "pumping" or even questions on the part of the Auto Boys, to gain from Chip his whole story. The substance of all he told, the reader knows. He began with the death of his father and faithfully related his surprise and pain to learn that at some time or another the elder Slider had assisted in a robbery.

This act Slider, Junior, did seek to excuse



"I ain't had nothin' warm for a good many days—years, it seems like."

to some extent by laying emphasis on the fact that his father had not robbed anyone who had a right to the money in his possession, but had merely taken money that had been stolen by him who had it.

It was Murky who had stolen the twenty thousand dollars in the first place. As to just who Murky was, Chip found it easy to make clear. Indeed nothing he could say about the tramp's character or conduct would have been too severe in the minds of his new friends. They had seen the scowling, wicked face. They were prepared to believe anything anyone might report of him whose expression was so hateful.

It was only natural that in every respect Chip's story enlisted the sympathies of the four chums. His misfortunes became their misfortunes as well, but they could not agree with him, at once, that Murky had bright prospects of success in his search for the missing treasure.

For earlier in the evening, Paul, to the most complete astonishment of his friends, had told

of his own recent adventure in the old house on the Point. He had told of the meeting of Nels Anderson and another man there, and to the Auto Boys it seemed entirely certain that these two, rather than the savage Murky, were most likely to locate the stolen money the search for which was commanding the attention of so many different persons at the same time.

Dave MacLester went so far as to assert that Nels Anderson and the mysterious man in the old clubhouse quite probably knew all about the twenty thousand dollar robbery; because, he declared, they most likely had a pretty active hand in the plans for it.

"Oh punk!" exclaimed Paul doubtingly, "You'd never prove that! Not unless you were to show that the man in the house is that fellow Grandall!"

"And that is just who he is!"

David's answer was positive—so positive and certain that all four boys were impressed by

the probable truth of his assertion as they had never been before.

“That’s the man!” said Chip Slider confidently. “Grandall was the paymaster who got himself robbed by Murky, then got my poor daddy to hold Murky up. That’s the man! That’s why Murky watches the clubhouse so! Ain’t I seen him? Day an’ night I’ve hid here an’ I’ve hid there and seen Murky watchin’ and a-watchin’, an’ never thinkin’ o’ *me* an’ always watchin’ *him!*”

CHAPTER XV

A QUIET, TRANQUIL SUNDAY

A great bull-frog whose hoarse croaking could always be heard above other sounds about the lake, "beginning at exactly eleven o'clock each night"—at least so Paul Jones positively stated—had started his unmelodious serenade a long time before the Auto Boys and their visitor prepared for bed. Paul's adventure, Chip Slider's whole story and the combined information thus afforded had proved a most fruitful field for speculation and conversation.

A bed for Slider was contrived by spreading over some hemlock boughs a tarpaulin used on the car for covering baggage. A bucket-seat cushion from the car served quite nicely as a pillow. Indeed Chip had not for a long while had so comfortable a resting place, crude as it was.

The plans for the night's sleeping arrangements were seized upon by Phil as an opportunity of finding out whether the strange boy had any knowledge of the recent robbery of the camp. With this in view his remarks about a scarcity of blankets and his inquiries as to where Chip had been managing to find accommodations were adroitly framed. Quite perfectly he succeeded in gaining the knowledge desired, nor did Slider ever suspect that the Auto Boys' suspicions might very easily have been directed toward him.

It was truly pitiable to hear Chip tell how in the night he had stood off a distance in the woods, taking note of the bright campfire of the four friends; how he had smelled their frying bacon when all he had to eat was a little dry bread; how he had been tempted to apply at the camp for food and shelter, but was afraid; how he had spent one whole evening within sight of the cheerful light about the shack, because it was a kind of company for him, and

how he slipped away and made his bed in the dead leaves beside a log when at last the camp-fire had quite died down.

Yet very interesting, too, was all that Chip told. One certain fact made clear was that he had nothing to do with the theft of provisions and other items from the camp. When this was fairly plain Phil Way ventured the remark that Murky had possibly fared better in the woods than Slider had done.

"No denyin' it," Chip assented. "I found his hang-out only yesterday. It would put you in mind of a bear's den, most, to see it."

"Tell all about it," urged Phil. "I'd like to smoke him out, like we would a woodchuck," he added with bitter earnestness.

"Nothin' much to it," answered Slider, but he went on promptly to report what he had seen and the manner of his discovery. He had been in search of berries, or whatever he could find for food, he said, for his slender store of provisions was nearly gone.

As he approached a marshy place where he thought he might find huckleberries, or blueberries, he discovered Murky there ahead of him. He had known the evil fellow was in the woods. He had watched him frequently, believing he might learn something of the stolen payroll money or at least what was going on so secretly about the old clubhouse.

Carefully keeping himself out of sight, Chip had followed when Murky left the marsh. The latter walked directly to a thicket on a knoll, went in among the bushes and disappeared. Then for a long time Slider patiently waited. He wondered if the treasure he was seeking might not be hidden in the copse.

Toward evening Murky left the thicket and slipped away in the direction of the point of land occupied by the clubhouse. Improving this opportunity Slider cautiously visited the brush-covered knoll. There he found the tramp's den—a nest of leaves and pine needles and branches between two logs. Poles laid

across the logs and covered over with branches made a roof for the den. Merely as a place to sleep the nest looked snug enough, Chip said.

“Didn’t see any blankets or dishes, did you?” Dave asked.

Indeed he had seen these very things, Slider answered, and had wondered how Murky came by them. He thought they probably had been taken from the clubhouse.

A complete quartette of voices answered this remark, setting Chip right as to the real ownership of the items mentioned. For not one of the four friends doubted now that it was Murky and no one else who had stolen their equipment and provisions. Considering the unscrupulous character of the fellow, they only wondered that he had not plundered the camp completely, leaving them nothing of value. It did not occur to them that probably the thief really wished to take more than he did, but could not conveniently carry a greater load.

It was a matter of congratulation among the

boys that they had not, by leaving the camp again unguarded, given Murky a chance to return. They were more certain than ever now that some one of them must be always in attendance about the shack, and it would have needed very little to persuade them, also, that despite Opal Lake's many attractive features their best course would be to pull up stakes and bid its shores good-bye.

Even after all were in bed this feature of their situation was discussed to some extent. Two main reasons for wishing to occupy the present camp, for yet a few days, were suggested. One was that in another week they must head the Thirty homeward and it was therefore hardly worth while to search out a more secure and less frequented locality for a camp site.

For reason number two there was the lively interest in the outcome of the search for the Grandall payroll money, and an earnest wish to help Chip Slider find the treasure, if possible;

and return it to the rightful owners,—the members of the club which had been practically broken up by its twenty thousand dollar loss, as many a larger organization might be.

Quite as usual Paul's voice was the last one heard when the discussion closed and the quiet of midnight settled over the forest. All had been silent for some time. Slider had expressed in his grateful, however awkward, way his appreciation of the offer his new friends made to help him. And Phil Way, answering for all the boys, said there was no obligation at all and no thanks necessary,—that nothing had been done, as yet, at least.

“Anyhow, it seems to me,” said Paul, after a long silence, “It seems to me as if we were all going to have our hands full. There will be Murky and Grandall and Nels Anderson digging into this mystery just as hard as we can, and maybe harder. And they are all bad ones, all of 'em, unless maybe Anderson might not

be so really bad excepting for being hooked up with a bad outfit, and all that."

No comment being made by the others with regard to these remarks, Jones went on to say that if there was any advantage to be had by having right and justice on their side, fortune ought to favor Slider and his friends in the search to be carried forward. He reasoned it all out, too, to his own satisfaction, that in the end justice must prevail in all things or the whole world would ultimately go to smash. "And that's a fact, now, ain't it?" he asked.

There came no answer.

"Well, is it, or don't it, wasn't it?" inquired Paul, rather facetiously.

Still no answer. Jones raised himself up on his elbow. He listened. It was perfectly evident from the heavy breathing all about him that every one of the other lads was sound asleep and had been for some time.

"Why! The bing-dingged mummies!" he ex-

claimed, "and me talking till I'm all but tonguetied—and to no one!" he added indignantly.

Having heard how Slider slept in the open woods with not even a cover over him more than leaves, the Auto Boys would have been ashamed now to feel afraid in their snug shack, no matter what strange noises might come from the lake's dark shore lines. And though the sounds of various wild creatures coming to bathe or drink did reach the lads, as occasionally one or more of them awakened during the night, no heed was given the disturbers. It was enough to know that the exceeding drouth brought animals from long distances to the water's edge and that they were much more intent on drinking than having trouble with anyone or even among themselves.

Not because it was Sunday morning but due quite entirely to their having retired so late, the Auto Boys slept longer than was their custom. Poor Chip Slider awakened with the first

peep of daylight, really tremendously surprised to find himself in such comfortable quarters. With a sigh of exquisite content and satisfaction he at once dropped off to sleep again. With the exception of the night at the bachelor's shanty he had not known such sweet and unbroken rest for—it seemed to him almost his whole lifetime.

And then again, if Chip had wondered whether there might be kindness, cheerfulness and plenty to eat somewhere in the world, as he most certainly often had done, he must surely have found the answer now. For when he awoke again the rich aroma of boiling coffee and cheering scent of frying bacon greeted him. From the beach down by the lake, too, there came lively laughter and a great splashing of water.

“Skip down and dive in! Paddle around some, then rub down lively!” urged Billy Worth, who, having had his plunge, was now nimbly getting breakfast. “Makes a man feel dandy!” he urged, really thinking that a bath

would do Chip good, anyway. "And hold on!" he added. "Here's soap and a towel if you care for 'em."

Slider was by no means afraid of the water. He was glad of the chance to take a swim and had the sound sense to realize, as well, that he stood much in need of a vigorous scrubbing. He hurried down to the water zestfully, albeit rather lamely for his body was stiff and sore. Paul made him feel at home at once by turning a back flip-flop off the now completed raft for his especial benefit. He asked Chip to follow suit, but the latter only smiled and dove off forward, instead.

"Being around the woods as much as you have been, you'll hardly have a change of clothes with you, but here's a shirt I'll never need, and you can keep it if you'll accept it from me," said Phil Way in a pleasant, off-hand manner, when he and Chip were dressing. It was a friendly yet delicate way of getting the young

stranger into one garment, at least, that was clean and whole.

The boy could not refuse nor did he wish to do so. Though he was sensitive, his feelings were not injured. Nor were his pride and manliness hurt at all. It was just because he was not permitted to feel that he was in any degree an object of charity.

True, Chip had begged for food along the road. One would think that did not indicate much pride on his part; but it should be remembered that asking for aid among strangers is very different from receiving anything as charity from those one considers his friends.

With such a beginning the Auto Boys and their new acquaintance found Sunday passing very pleasantly. They wrote letters, took long walks about the lake and Phil and Paul took Chip for a ride in the car, going almost to Anderson's cabin before turning back.

This put the boys in mind of the tree that had been shivered by the mighty blow of the great

Swede. After dinner all but Dave walked out to the end of the gravel road improvement to inspect the spot again and particularly to see the slivered stump on which Anderson's sledge had fallen with such mighty force.

Here, it developed, Slider had made his headquarters, so far as he may be said to have had anything of the kind in the woods. He had kept his stock of food here, hidden in a weather-beaten cracker box, that some teamster had used in feeding his horses. But there was no food left now, Chip explained. Then he added that but for falling in with his new friends he would have been obliged to abandon, for the time, at least, his search for the stolen fortune. The few berries he could find would not have been enough to sustain him. He had eaten even the stray stalks of stunted corn that grew up where horses, used in the road building, had been fed.

MacLester had remained on guard in camp while the others were out upon the old roadway.

The latter returned to find him perched on the log projecting over the water, scrutinizing the Point and the old house there closely.

“Hang it!” declared David forcefully, “I wish we hadn’t agreed that we wouldn’t go near the clubhouse today. I’ve seen a man moving about over there. He came out on the porch toward the lake, once, and after looking all around he stepped down to that rotten old wharf and threw something into the water.”

“Gee whiz!” Paul Jones burst forth, “was it the same man we saw before?”

“Yes, the one with the golf cap,” MacLester said. “When he went inside he went upstairs and closed that window that has been open. He acted as if he was getting ready to go away.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE SEARCH IN THE OLD HOUSE

Paul's adventure in the old house somehow seemed to give importance to his opinions on all matters pertaining to that subject. So when he suggested that the act of throwing something into the water by the tenant of the abandoned building was for the purpose of destroying evidence, all the boys agreed that quite likely such was the truth.

What evidence this person, be he Grandall or not, wished to destroy and why, was the subject of vast discussion. Since the coming of Slider among them, particularly, the Auto Boys found the mystery of the stolen twenty thousand dollars to possess for them a strong personal interest. They talked over and over again, and with the greatest relish, everything that had come

within their notice in and around the bleak old structure down there on the Point.

Finally—it was during the Sunday evening supper of cold hard-boiled eggs, bread and butter, bananas, graham crackers and coffee—that finally, and at last, Phil Way proposed that a really serious visit be made to the clubhouse the following morning. Of any person encountered—Mr. Murky excepted, of course—permission to use the vise and other equipment in the automobile shed would be asked. This would be a reasonable pretext for going to the clubhouse grounds. And being on those premises, everyone should look carefully about for some clue to the stolen money's hiding place.

It was not easy for Captain Phil to suggest this plan. He was not sure it was quite square and honorable—"on the level"—as some would say,—but he called it a stratagem in a worthy cause and so felt better over it. But really, since the cause was that of helping Chip Slider, as against such villains as Murky and Grandall,

no one could blame Phil, or blame any of the lads that they welcomed his proposal heartily.

The day had been hot and close. Contrary to the usual condition, also, the air grew little if any cooler as night came on. A dive from the projecting log into the lake to cool off was in order then, as the boys prepared for bed.

“Just goes to show what a nuisance clothes are, anyway,” observed Paul Jones, as he dried himself. He was rejoicing exceedingly that he had only to jump into his nightshirt to be clothed to all necessary extent, following his swim. “Heap fine idea if we had clothes for day time as simple as for night time!” he added.

“Yes sir, it’s just such fellows as you, Jones, that would sooner or later drift right back to the stone age if there weren’t more energetic ones to drag you along forward, making you wear clothes and things—keeping you civilized,” was MacLester’s answer. A good-natured grin accompanied his remarks.

“Well, I s’pose it takes clothes to give some

folks an appearance of being civilized," was Paul's warm rejoinder, yet with utmost good-nature. "But for my part—well, I'll go on wearing 'em, David, for your sake."

"And it would make your appearance more civilized still if you made more civil use of your tongue," MacLester retorted.

Then Jones had recourse to his usual, "Tush, tush, Davy! You've tired yourself all out. You'll feel better tomorrow."

This sort of language, in a fatherly tone that from Paul's slender size, in contrast with Dave's large frame, was really grotesque, always provoked a mild laugh. Usually, too, it closed the wordy clashes in which the two boys frequently engaged.

MacLester made no further response. He was ready for bed now. Billy had already crept in and Phil and Chip Slider were following him.

"Last is best of all the game," chirped Jones in his own blithe, self-complacent way as he saw

that he was bringing up the rear, as often he had done before. But in another moment he likewise was in bed. The boys were feeling now the late hours of the night before. Undoubtedly they all would "feel better tomorrow."

The probability that the amiable Mr. Murky would discover Chip Slider's presence in the woods had been discussed before, but the talk was renewed at breakfast Monday morning. Chip was quite sure the old fellow did not suspect that he was near. He had been very careful to keep out of Murky's sight and was more anxious than ever to do so now, being quite sure there would be serious trouble for himself and his new friends as well, were he discovered.

It was so apparent that Slider stood in great dread of the tramp that Phil had no hesitancy in suggesting that he might better remain at the camp while the others visited the old house. Chip agreed readily. He said he could be of no use elsewhere, and his presence with the Auto

Boys would but inflame Murky as much against them as himself if they chanced to meet him.

With the exception of the upstairs window being closed, the clubhouse and its surroundings looked exactly the same as on their former visits to the Point, the Auto Boys found. The air of loneliness, melancholy and excessive quiet impressed them all just as it had done before. The sound of their own footsteps appeared to ring in a hollow and unnatural way. Their voices, though low and subdued, seemed loud and harsh in their ears in the foreboding calm of this haunted atmosphere.

"I don't see *why* it should always feel so here—as if a fellow was just going to be scared to death," remarked Billy in an undertone.

"If you figure it out, though, it's all in your mind," replied Phil thoughtfully. "Trouble is, to make yourself believe it."

But notwithstanding his reasoning, sound enough, undoubtedly, despite the awful tragedy the Point was so soon to witness—Captain Phil

carried his philosophy rather gingerly, as it were, when he stepped up on the porch to knock. In other words, he stepped very lightly. Still his rapping was right sharp and it should have brought a response had there been anyone within hearing, willing to make answer.

Peering in at the windows, the boys could see nothing in any way different than when they had been at the house the first time.

"I tell you whoever *was* here has gone," said MacLester for the fourth or fifth time, and he tried the door. It was locked. The door at the rear,—that is, the one opening upon the high porch facing the lake, was likewise tightly secured.

"Now then," said Phil, resolutely, "we're face to face with the question that has been in my mind all night. What are we going to do next? And I'll tell you what we *are* going to do. We have no right to go into the house—no right at all, one way you look at it. But that isn't the answer. We are helping Chip Slider

with his search for money that was stolen and hidden, and that ought to be found and returned to its owners. Then it's *necessary* that we go in this clubhouse and *we're going in.*"

"Paul knows the way up through the cellar! Let him get in at the window he got out of and so go up the cellar stairs and open the door for us. There's a key inside, likely," proposed Billy.

"Say! how'd you like to take a run and jump off the dock?" answered young Mr. Jones with more fervor than elegance. "No, sir! We can find some other window open!"

And Paul was right. A surprise awaited the boys when they reached the west side of the house. (The path from front to rear passed on the east of the building.) The brush and a couple of tall trees grew very close to the walls at the westerly side. Phil was foremost as the friends ventured in that direction.

"Look!" he cried suddenly. "A window

open, and more than that, it's smashed to smithereens!"

Quite true it was. The fragments of glass littered the parched and stunted grass. The sash of the window was raised to its fullest height. A freshly broken branch of a low bush, close by, was evidence that the mischief had been done but recently.

The boys could only guess by whom and for what purpose the window had been shattered. The thought came to them that Murky might have been doing some investigating inside. Possibly he was in the house at this very minute. The idea was not a pleasant one to contemplate.

"Gee whiz! I'd fade *away*—I'd shrink up to a pale shadow and perish—actually perish, if ever that fellow got hold of *me*!" said young Mr. Jones. His voice indicated that perhaps his exaggerated statement might not be so overdrawn as it appeared.

"Come on! Give me a lift, somebody," ex-

claimed Way impatiently. Then, ignoring Billy's prompt offer of a hand to boost him, up he clambered and the next moment stood within. Billy, Paul and Dave followed.

The air in the house was close and oppressive. Outside the sun shone hot. Not even a zephyr stirred the leaves. A bluejay shrieked noisily, as if in protest at the visitors' conduct. With something of that "fading away" feeling Paul Jones had mentioned, the boys proceeded, however, from room to room.

Down stairs they found everything to be quite as has been described heretofore. The bucket on the kitchen table beside which, on a former occasion, the boys had seen a tiny pool of water, was now empty and turned upside down. Other little things, such as the tin dipper being inside a cupboard and every drawer and every door closed, suggested that whoever had occupied the house had indeed gone away.

A door opened upon the stairs that led to the second floor. It was closed but not locked. Up

the dusty steps the boys went. They found themselves in a hall off of which opened six small bed-rooms. In each was a bedstead of one kind or another, some of iron, some built of pine lumber. There were mattresses on all the beds but on only one was there other bedding. This was in the room the window of which the boys had more than once seen to be open.

A couple of blankets and a pillow were thrown loosely over this mattress. The latter was quite out of its proper position as if it had been placed on the bedstead hurriedly. Looking more closely the lads discovered that the other mattresses were awry. Dave suggested that someone had pulled them this way and that to see if anything was hidden in or under them. There was no telling whether he was right.

Between two of the tiny bed-rooms was a bath-room. It contained a tub and washstand only, but was quite nicely finished in painted pine as, indeed, was all the second floor. There were no towels, soap, brushes or any of the

usual paraphernalia of a bath-room in sight but on a little shelf beneath the mirror were a shaving-mug and brush.

"See! this has been used just lately! The soap is still wet on the brush," Phil Way observed, picking up that article. "Mr. Grandall forgot it, I reckon."

"Grandall—your grandmother!" exclaimed Worth quickly. "Look at the initial B, big as life, on the cup!"

"Just the same, it was Grandall who was here and the only questions are, what did he come for and where has he went?" said Paul Jones more positively than grammatically.

"Anyhow the shaving cup or the initial, either one, is no sure sign of anything except that someone was here, and we knew that before," said Way reflectively. "Quite likely the reason the mug was left here was that it had been here all along and did not belong to Grandall," he reasoned.

"Now you're shouting," spoke Jones with emphasis.

At the end of the narrow hall was a small room with a door opening upon a balcony. Here the boys stepped out. The view of the lake from this point was extremely pretty. Under the glow of the sun the water shone like silver. The green shores looked cool and delightful—far cooler than they really were.

But they were lovely to the eye. Only one tall, dead pine whose naked top and branches rose gaunt and ghostly above the foliage of its neighbors offered the slightest omen of the impending danger in a scene so tranquil.

A high trellis on which the roses or some vines had at some time clambered to this balcony or porch roof where the boys now stood, offered them an opportunity to climb down to the ground. Only Billy chose this route. He quickly reached the earth and went out to the decaying remnants of the wharf while the others resumed their search through the house.

But if he thought to discover any sign of whatever the strange man threw into the water the day before, he was disappointed.

Worth rejoined his friends in the clubhouse living-room. Striking many matches to find the way, they all descended the steep steps into the cellar. Very little light entered this dark place. One small window only was there beside the one whose presence Paul Jones had found so convenient.

"Here's the place to look carefully," observed Billy. "But I say, we are a pack of mutton-heads! What if someone should come into the house this minute? Tell you what! You fellows dig around here and I'll stand guard upstairs."

"I did think of such a plan but after seeing that broken window, I concluded it wasn't necessary," said Phil. "Whoever there might be to disturb us now, has been through the house ahead of us, I'm thinking. And it's my opinion that we are too late coming here, anyhow. The

man who most likely found the twenty thousand dollars is the one who cleared out last night."

Still Billy Worth insisted on going upstairs to stand guard while the search of the dark cellar went forward and the bluejay outside harshly screamed its protests while the gaunt, bare top of the old dead pine frowned ominously across the lake.

CHAPTER XVII

A GUEST AT NELS ANDERSON'S

In vain did the youthful searchers examine every foot of the cellar's earthen floor. The thought that there, if anywhere, the treasure might be buried, impressed them strongly and right diligently did they apply themselves to their task.

A few old boxes, a heavy pine table and a combination cupboard and ice chest were substantially all the cellar contained. All these were explored and the ground beneath them thoroughly inspected. "Nothing doing," was the way Jones summed up the result, and if he meant by this that every effort was fruitless, as would appear likely, he was quite correct.

All through the automobile shed and all about the club grounds the boys carried their exploring and their minute inspection of whatever had

the appearance of being a likely hiding place for a suit-case containing twenty thousand dollars of currency. Despite the temptation to experiment with the engine that had been used for pumping, to try the tools of the workbench, or to put afloat the fishing skiff they discovered, partly covered with lumber at the far end of the shed, they molested nothing. They only looked, but this they did thoroughly.

It was noon and Chip Slider, keeping camp alone, had become anxious and worried for the safety of his new friends before the latter made their appearance at the lean-to. He looked wistfully from one to another and read in their faces the answer to the question in his mind.

All hands fell to with preparations for dinner. Chip had busied himself with the gathering of an immense quantity of dry wood, but fresh water must be brought from the well in the sandy beach, potatoes must be washed, peeled and sliced for frying; bacon must be sliced; eggs and butter brought from the "refrig-

erator," also,—something for everyone to do, in short, under Chef Billy's competent direction.

Whether Murky, as well as the wearer of the golfing cap, that is, the recent tenant of the clubhouse, had departed from the woods, was a question all tried in vain to answer satisfactorily as the boys sat at dinner. And if one, or both, had or had not really gone for good, was also an inquiry, the answer to which could not be discovered.

Paul Jones proposed that a visit be made to the den Murky had made for himself. Slider could show the way. Approaching carefully, it might be quite easy to discover the tramp's presence or absence without danger of being seen by him. Billy Worth interposed with the suggestion that a trip to Staretta was more important. Provisions were needed, there would surely be some mail at the office and the letters written yesterday should be posted.

"Yes, and stop at Anderson's, too!" put in

MacLester. "I'm mighty suspicious of that individual, *myself*,—'specially after Jonesy's experience!"

With these good reasons for going to town confronting them, together with the fact that the use of their car was always a source of keen enjoyment to the Auto Boys, it seems quite needless to state what they decided to do.

Paul inspected the gasoline supply and added the contents of a ten gallon can kept as a reserve, not forgetting to put the now empty can in the tonneau to be refilled at Staretta. Dave looked to the quantity of oil in the reservoir and decided none was needed. Phil in the meantime was examining nuts and bolts with a practiced eye—a hardly necessary proceeding for every part of the beloved machine had been put in the pink of order on Saturday afternoon.

"Worth's turn to drive," said Jones. "So go on, Bill. I'll wash dishes. Gee whiz! If there's anything I'd rather do than wash dishes—"

“Yes, the list would fill a book!” Worth broke in. “You go ahead, Paul, I’m going to stay in camp. Going to cook up a little stuff and all I ask of you fellows is to bring these things from Fraley’s.”

Worth passed over a list he had been writing and, with a show of an extreme reluctance he did not feel, Paul climbed up to the driver’s seat. Phil Way meantime was protesting that he would remain to guard camp. Billy would not listen, but said in an undertone that Way must go along to make Chip feel comfortable and contented.

For Slider had shown for Way a fondness that was both beautiful and pathetic. It was as if he realized that he had truly found the answer to the musing questions of his lifetime at last. This was true with regard to all four of the chums but most especially was Chip already devoted to Phil.

With MacLester up beside Paul, and Way and the now clean and well-fed boy of the

woods in the tonneau, the graceful automobile threaded its route among the trees. With roads averaging from fair to good, an hour would have taken the travelers to Staretta easily. With six or seven miles of woodland trail, then an equal distance of but moderately good going before getting fairly out of the forest, Paul took an hour and a half for the trip. There was no need to hurry, he said, but just the same as soon as the wheels struck the good, level earth not far from town the speedometer shot up to "30."

Link Fraley was found, busy as usual, this time packing eggs into a shipping case; but for once he stopped working the moment he caught sight of his callers. Sometimes he had allowed his father to wait on the boys as they did their buying, but today he told the senior member of the house he would attend to them himself.

"Been wantin' to see ye," said Link cordially. "Anything new back in the timber?"

The young storekeeper's voice had a peculiar

inflection and his face bore an expression that answered "yes" to his own question.

"A little; that is, we have something to tell and something to ask about, as usual," Phil replied. "Here's the list of things Billy wanted. If you'll get them ready while we go over to the post-office—we want to have a good, old talk with you."

"Been annexing part of our lumber country population, I see," remarked Fraley in an undertone glancing toward Slider who had waited at the door.

Phil nodded.

"Want to look a little out," Fraley continued, with a shake of his head and a tone of doubt; but he turned away at once to find the baking soda, item number one in Billy Worth's list, and his young friends betook themselves to the post-office.

At the rear door of Fraley & Son's establishment was a platform to facilitate the loading and unloading of freight. It was roofed over

with pine boards that gave protection from sun or rain and, as whatever slight breeze there might be blowing was to be found here, there was no better place in Staretta for a chat on a hot day. Seated on kegs of nails on this platform, upon their return to the store, the Auto Boys told Mr. Fraley, Jr., the main facts of their discoveries since last seeing him.

Link listened with the most sober attention.

"I honestly don't know," said he at last, "whether to take much stock in the story of the suit-case full of swag or not. But it does look as if things in general pointed in that direction. I didn't believe, at first, that your neighbor up there by the lake was anything more than one of these vacation tourists that often go tramping 'round, even if he wasn't just a chap doing some shooting out of season. But I'm pretty well satisfied now that a lot more than ever *I* suspected has been going on. Listen here!"

With this Link took from between the leaves of a notebook a neatly folded clipping from

a newspaper. Clearing his throat, while he opened the clipping and smoothed it over his knee, he proceeded to read aloud.

The newspaper item was an Associated Press dispatch dated from ——, the home city of the Longknives Club. Its substance was that Lewis Grandall, teller of the Commercial Trust & Banking Company of that city, was missing from his home. His absence was supposed to be on account of an investigation the Grand Jury had been making in connection with certain city contracts in which he had been interested, not as an officer of the bank, but personally. The disappearance of Grandall, the dispatch stated, had caused a small run on the bank and general uneasiness among the depositors and stockholders. This had later been quieted by a signed statement from the directors stating positively that the company's interests were not involved in any of the missing teller's personal business affairs.

“From which it would seem to a man up a

tree that one certain Grandall was finding Opal Lake atmosphere good for his constitution," remarked Link Fraley as he finished reading. "But," he went on, "it looks to me a lot more as if he had come up here for his health, so to speak, than to hunt for a bag of the coin of the realm that somebody stole three years ago. The point is, that if the twenty thousand dollars that the road builders should have got, but didn't, was put through a nice, neat and orderly system of being stolen here and there till it all got back to Grandall again, he ain't been letting it lie around the woods and drawin' no interest nearly three years now."

"By ginger! I knew that fellow at the clubhouse was Grandall, all right," spoke up Paul Jones. "And you must have hit the nail on the head when you told us in the first place that Nels Anderson was mixed up with him in cheating that whole army of men out of their pay," the boy added briskly.

"That doesn't dovetail with what we already

know about Murky getting the money first and then Slider taking it from him and its getting back to Grandall again," said Paul thoughtfully.

"Oh, no! that wouldn't make much difference," said Fraley. "Grandall was playing everybody against everybody else for the benefit of Grandall. That was his general reputation, too—downright deceitful! Never knew just where he'd hook up or how long he'd be either one thing or the other—your best friend, or your worst enemy."

Whether Grandall had been frightened away from the clubhouse by finding Murky to be in the vicinity, or for other reasons had deemed the lake an unsafe hiding place, the boys and Fraley debated for some time. As they at last prepared to go, Link called Phil to one side. He did not like the notion of Chip Slider being taken up by the Auto Boys in any very intimate way, he declared. He had known the elder Slider, he said, and there were a lot of better

men in Michigan than he and a lot of better boys than his son was likely to be.

Phil told Fraley he was surely mistaken with regard to Chip, at least, but promised he would be on his guard in case he found any deceptive tendencies developing in the young gentleman in question.

Meanwhile Paul and Dave had driven to the general repair shop at which their gasoline was purchased and all were soon ready for the road. With a steady purr their quiet, powerful car left the town behind. What a perfect machine it was! And what its owners would do were anything to happen to deprive them of its ever-ready services—the very thought would have been quite unbearable. It is a wise plan, indeed, that none of us can see even a few short hours forward, or know certainly the changes a single day may bring.

An adequate excuse for stopping at the lowly home of the Andersons had not been forgotten by the chums while in town. Choosing to call

there on their homeward way rather than when on the road in from the woods, they now had with them an extra half dozen of bananas.

Mrs. Anderson sat on a rickety chair at the shady side of the little house vainly trying to get a breath of fresh air while doing some mending, as the Thirty came to a stop near her. Hastily she arose and went around to a back door.

Phil was already out of the car and was walking up to the low front step—the dwelling was without a porch—when through the open doors he saw Mrs. Anderson enter at the rear. She spoke some words in her native tongue the boy did not understand; but directly Nels Anderson stepped forward from the kitchen to meet him while at the same time another man glided silently out of the door at which the woman had just come in. The man wore a golfing cap. If he was not the identical person who had lately occupied the clubhouse then Phil Way was vastly mistaken.

“Wouldn't you like some bananas?” asked Way pleasantly. “We thought likely you did not get to town often and maybe would relish a taste of these,” and with a friendly smile he tendered his offering.

With only a word of thanks and that spoken rather indifferently, Phil thought, the great Swede accepted the fruit. Still holding the paper sack under his arm he said he wished the camp at the lake only good luck but he thought it dangerous for the boys to stay there. It would be more so as time went on, unless a pouring rain came very soon to wet the ground and foliage. The probability of forest fires near by was becoming serious. Two severe blazes had already occurred. He pointed away to the west and south, calling attention to smoke that he said he could see over the distant tree tops.

Oddly enough Phil could see no smoke, at least nothing more than usual. The horizon in this region had always a hazy, smoky tinge, he had observed. Nevertheless he said he appre-

ciated the suggestion and added that a few days more would see the breaking of camp at the lake, anyway. It was in his thoughts to ask what Anderson himself would do in the event of a forest fire. The tiny clearing, he thought, would be very little protection if the flames came near it.

But Way refrained from speaking of this. There was a matter of more importance about which he wished to inquire. "Do you know if there is anyone staying at the clubhouse at the lake, Mr. Anderson?" Thus did the boy frame his question. Receiving no answer but a shake of the head, Phil then continued. "Because," said he, "it would be right convenient if we could get permission to use the workbench in the automobile house. We'd do no harm to anything."

"I tank yo better let him bay," Nels answered, the least bit sharply. But more kindly he went on to say that he knew of no one being at the clubhouse now and that while the prop-

erty was not his, the best advice he could offer was not to meddle with anything in the buildings or on the grounds.

Quite baffled by the Swede's apparent friendliness, yet certain that he was practicing deception, Phil returned to the machine. He told fully of the conversation with Anderson while the car purred forward.

Without exception the boys agreed with him that the talk of forest fires was like the denial of all knowledge of the clubhouse being occupied—simple deception, and nothing else. Clinching the soundness of this reasoning also, was the certain fact that the recent clubhouse tenant was now Anderson's guest.

“Grandall! He saw Murky or Murky saw him! He must have guessed that Murky has found out how he had been given the double cross, and was after him in dead earnest. Result: Grandall, in cahoots with Anderson for some bad business or other, packs his little satchel and goes to the Swede's to stay.”

So did Dave MacLester reason the whole matter out. Chip Slider nodded his endorsement of these conclusions.

“They’ve got that stolen money, so they have!” he said. “We could have them arrested,” he added, only the word he used was “pinched.”

“And we will! *Mark that!*” said Phil Way.

Yet it often does happen that young gentlemen, and older ones, too, make assertions which, in the end, lead not where it was thought they would do at all.

CHAPTER XVIII

“WHO SAID I WAS AFRAID?”

For Billy's information the developments of the afternoon were told and retold when all were again together in the camp. There was much discussion, too, concerning the advisability of causing the arrest of the man in the golfing cap and, possibly, Nels Anderson as well.

Meantime Billy had announced supper. It was a most tempting little meal with warm soda biscuits and honey as the chief items. The former Chef Worth had prepared during the afternoon and the latter he had caused to be brought from Fraley's in anticipation of his having the biscuits ready.

No doubt it was at the comfortable old farm home of Tyler Gleason that the four chums had developed a marked fondness for the delicacies

mentioned, as readers of "The Auto Boys" will remember; but be that as it may, they enjoyed the change from the usual camp fare hugely.

As has been stated, there was no little discussion as to whether the Staretta officers should be asked to arrest and hold the stranger at Nels Anderson's until he could be positively identified as Grandall, the dishonest Longknives' treasurer. Phil Way declared firmly that this must be done.

"Personally, I don't see any sense in mixing up in an affair that doesn't really matter much to us!" exclaimed MacLester. He had been quiet for a long time. When he did speak it was with hard emphasis in his voice. "Murky and Grandall and the whole outfit that got away with the cash the road builders should have had—well! we don't usually have much to do with such people and no good will come of our beginning now," the boy added.

For a moment Chip Slider's face wore a look of anger. Perhaps he thought Dave's latter

remark was aimed at him. But he said nothing.

Phil looked at MacLester in a significant manner, as if he would caution him against speaking so. Yet, "No use growling, Davy," were the words he said. Then he added that such a thing as duty must be taken into consideration; that one who has knowledge of a crime and conceals it is regarded by the law the same as if he actually shielded the wrong-doer.

"Gee whiz! I should say so," piped Paul Jones with shrill emphasis. "We'd be a pack of softies if we let Grandall and Murky, and the rest, get away, after all we know now!"

When Billy also joined heartily with Phil and Paul in urging that the Staretta officers be notified of the presence of both Grandall and Murky, MacLester no longer held back. How best to go about the matter, however, became immediately a problem.

Dave wanted to telegraph the police in Grandall's home town and learn if the man was really wanted by them. The hearsay evidence

possessed by Slider, with regard to the stolen twenty thousand dollars, he declared, wasn't worth much until it could be backed up by more hard, cold facts than were thus far in hand.

"Suppose we were to go back to Staretta and have a talk with the sheriff or chief-of-police or constable—whatever they have there in the brass buttons line—tonight," proposed Billy. He was resting comfortably, his back against a tree, while Phil and Dave, with Slider's help, were washing the dishes.

Having had a quiet but busy afternoon young Mr. Worth was quite ready for an evening out.

"Sure pop!" Paul Jones exclaimed. "How do we know but that Grandall fellow is right on his way now to fly the coop?—and that's just what he is, most likely."

"Go ahead! I'll keep camp—Slider and I," put in MacLester quickly. Perhaps Dave was anxious to show Chip some friendly attention to make amends for the unpleasant words spoken a little while before. Perhaps Chip, as

well, wished to show that he harbored no ill feeling. At any rate, "Yes, let him an' me do up the rest of them dishes an' the rest of you get started sooner," the lad proposed.

The thought that Slider's presence, to tell the officers in person what he knew of the stolen payroll money, would be highly desirable, did not occur even to Phil, usually quick to see such things. The plan was put into effect at once. With headlights throwing a long, white glow before them Billy, Phil and Paul said good-bye. Worth was at the wheel, one finger on the throttle, and at truly hazardous speed he sent the steady Thirty in and out among the trees that bordered the narrow trail.

"Goodness, Bill! What's the hurry?" ejaculated Phil, alone in the tonneau and getting more of a shaking up than he relished.

"Oh, he thinks there's so many trees around it won't hurt if he does tear out a few of the big, old ones *that are all done growing anyway*," Paul added grimly.

For it most generally is true that the driver is much less nervous than his passengers. A chuckle was Worth's only answer, but he did retard the throttle some and with less gas the machine at once slowed down.

The evening was close and warm as the previous night had been. The moon had not yet risen but, knowing every part of the road, Billy let the car pick up speed again directly he reached the broader, straighter path.

"We'll get this robbery business into the hands of the bluecoats; then home for us," called Phil from his seat behind. He would not willingly have admitted it, but he believed he smelled smoke. Also he was thinking of a clipping enclosed from home that morning telling of very destructive forest fires in other sections of this northern part of Michigan.

"I guess so," Worth answered. "It's a shame to punish a car on such roads as these. The lake is all right and being by ourselves is just what we wanted, but —"

The sentence was not finished. It was a way Billy had of leaving some things unsaid. In this case the road told all the driver had left unspoken. It was certainly "no boulevard," as young Mr. Jones had expressively remarked the first time the chums traversed it.

The dim glow of a kitchen lamp was the only sign of life the boys noticed at Nels Anderson's little house as they passed. They did not pause. There would be no occasion for them to visit the place again, they had decided, but whether correctly or not will in due time be apparent. Just now the main thing was to reach Staretta before everyone, Link Fraley in particular, would most likely be found in bed.

True it was that the little town fell asleep early. "And what's to stop it?" Paul Jones had once asked. Yet the lights were still burning in Fraley's store and at the postoffice, which was in the little shoe store opposite, when the Thirty rumbled down the main street.

Mr. Lincoln Fraley, standing in the doorway, went down the steps to meet the boys as they drove up. Something had happened, he was quite sure, to bring them back so soon; for, not being familiar with the rapid traveling an automobile affords, he had no idea of the lads having been to Opal Lake and back since he last saw them.

"It's time to close up anyhow. Come take a ride," Billy invited.

Mr. Fraley said his father would attend to closing the store and, going in leisurely for his hat—lest he be suspected of a too lively interest in the prospect of an automobile ride if he hurried, perhaps—he presently seated himself in the tonneau beside Phil. As Billy drove slowly forward Way told of the discovery of Grandall at Anderson's. Briefly he stated the intention of causing the man's arrest and the capture of Murky, as well, which, he was certain, could be quite readily accomplished.

"Well now!" said Mr. Fraley in a musing

tone, and, "if it it don't beat me!" he slowly added in the same slow and reflective manner.

"But great land of belly aches!" Paul Jones chirped protestingly, "don't you see what we want? We want to know whom we must see—sheriff—judge—chiropodist—whoever it may be to get these chaps into jail and nail down those twenty thousand pieces of eight!"

"Don't be in a hurry," spoke Fraley with greater animation. "What I had in mind was that Nels Anderson surely is consorting with Grandall and probably has been all along. I'm the more sure of it because the Swede was in the store early this morning and bought a lot more stuff than we've ever sold him at one time before. I didn't wait on him and didn't know of it at the time you were here this afternoon. My father just happened to mention it at supper. Pretty plain now where Nels got the money and plain as daylight, as well, that he expects to have company for some time,

which accounts for the stack of provisions he took back with him."

"All the more reason—" Phil began, meaning to continue, "that we should get in touch with the officers at once."

Link anticipated what he would have said. "No," he interrupted, "You don't need be in any hurry. And you do want to bring that Slider boy with you when you come to talk with the sheriff. Your evidence is mostly second-hand anyway. You don't want to give it to the county officers third-hand and fourth-hand when it ain't necessary. I'm watchin' the papers every day and I'll get some more news about Grandall's running away from the Grand Jury and his bank. Just you wait."

There was a lurking suspicion in Billy Worth's mind that Fraley wished to wait until he, himself, could communicate with the officers, but he said nothing. Phil and Paul were disappointed, too, that their friend would not advise immediate action.

The boys talked of those matters after they had left Link at his home,—the large, plain house with flower beds in front, near the store. But they had headed the car toward Opal Lake now and their conclusion was to continue homeward. They would do nothing until the next afternoon, at least, at which time, it had been agreed, they were to see Fraley again. They would find out, meanwhile, and be able to inform the officers, whether Mr. Murky was still “at home” at the rude shelter where Chip had seen him.

The light was yet burning at the humble Anderson dwelling as the friends passed on their homeward way. They thought they saw the figures of two men sitting just outside the door where a faint breath of air might now be stirring, but could not be sure. They were quite satisfied the guest of the family was still there and for the present this knowledge was sufficient.

As the headlights' glare swept the camp at

Opal Lake Chip Slider was for a moment seen making frantic gestures. He seemed to wish the boys to hurry. Phil almost fell over the excited youth as he jumped down from a forward seat a few seconds later, for Chip had seized a front fender as if he would thereby help to halt the car more quickly.

"I can't help it," cried Slider with anxiety, "and I don't want to be scared over nothin'—but it's Dave! He went over the lake in the boat an' that's the last I seen him. It was somebody hollerin'—somebody hollerin' from t'other side!"

With real alarm the three friends heard the disconnected words of the frightened Chip. In a chorus they demanded to know all about the matter, their own language hardly more clear than Slider's. Phil was first to gain composure enough to call for quiet. Then he said:

"Now, Chip, tell us precisely what happened and how long ago. I guess Mac could get himself out of any kind of pickle he'd be likely

to get into," he added with vastly more confidence than he felt. "Go ahead now, and don't be so rattled."

It was only a half hour or thereabouts after the automobile had gone, the boy stated, his tones still filled with alarm, when he and MacLester heard cries from across the lake. They had washed and put away the dishes left to their attention, and were sitting down by the water, thinking it cooler on the beach. Some refuse they had thrown on the campfire blazed up, making quite a bright light. Like a distant whistle of a railroad engine there came a little later a long, loud cry, "Hello-o!"

"Well, hello!" MacLester cried in answer, Chip stated, telling his story clearly, but so slowly Paul was fairly bursting with impatience. There was more "hollering" of hellos, the lad went on, then the voice from over the water asked, "Could ye put me up fer the night?" Dave answered, "Yes, come on over." Replies

came back, "Have ye a boat?" and "Could ye not kindly row across fer me?"

The outcome of the whole matter was that MacLester remarked to Chip that they would wait until Phil and the others returned.

" 'Would you be afraid to cross over alone?' I asked him," said Slider, "an' I meant just a fair question, but he turned quick as a cat.

" 'Who said I was afraid?' he spoke pretty sharp. Then he hollered out to the party that had been yellin', 'Keep singing out to guide me an' I'll paddle over to you.'

"He got in the boat and started and never a word he said. Every minute or two I heard the other one and Dave hollerin' out to each other till about the time when the boat could have touched t'other shore. Then it was still an' I ain't heard a word since. I've yelled an' yelled an' kept the fire blazin' up to steer 'em straight to this here side, but never a word of answer did I get an' hide nor hair of 'em I ain't seen."

"Could it have been that fellow Murky? Would you know his voice?" asked Billy.

Chip shook his head. He was quite sure the voice was not that of the person mentioned.

"He could disguise his voice easy enough," spoke Paul dejectedly. "Dave could swim all night, but the other fellow—"

"Now wait a minute!" interrupted Phil briskly, feeling that he simply *must* face the situation with courage, bad as it might be. He hurried down to the beach. Loudly and again and again he called, "Oh! Dave," and "Oh, David MacLester!"

No answer came to his despairing cries. Softly the water lapped the sand at his feet. In the distance the frogs were croaking. Darkness too deep to let even the outlines of the farther shore be seen hung over Opal Lake and distinctly on the light breeze now springing up came the odor of burning pine.

"If we only had another boat!" murmured

Paul. "There's the skiff down by the clubhouse," he meekly suggested.

"Why," said Billy, "our old boat was safe enough! I can't believe they ever left the other side. That's where we've got to get to. We can go around the east end of the lake in about half an hour's walk."

Phil Way was never so perplexed—never so at a loss to know what to do. Looked to as the leader and the captain in all things, he usually was quick to suggest, quick to decide and quite generally for the best. His heart—his nerve—whatever it is that keeps the mind steady and alert at such time—came nearer failing him now than ever before.

All the boys, Chip included, were on the beach. Several times Phil's cries had been repeated by the others. At last—

"We must get the skiff," Way declared. "If Dave's on dry land we can find him when daylight comes, if not before. But if he's holding on to an upset boat, though too weak to an-

swer us, maybe, we've got to find him right off."

Leaving Paul to guard the camp and keep a bright fire burning, Billy and Phil, with Chip accompanying them, were soon running toward the old clubhouse. They carried the oil lamps from the car and thus made good progress. But the skiff was found dry and seamy. It would be necessary for one or another to keep bailing constantly, they saw, the moment they launched her.

And where were the oars? In their excitement the boys had not noticed the absence of this very necessary equipment until the boat was in the water. With frantic haste they searched here and there. The rays of their lamps were far from powerful and close inspection of each nook and corner must be made to see what might be there.

The excessive stillness; the atmosphere of loneliness and melancholy that hung always about the Point and its deserted buildings

seemed intensified tonight. The shadows cast by the two lamps seemed unnaturally gaunt and ghostly. With all their activity the three lads could not but be impressed by these things, but they were too occupied to be frightened by them.

“At last!” Phil’s voice came low but quick. In another moment he drew a pair of oars from behind an unused door whose lower panels a charge of buckshot had shattered, apparently, and which was now stored in a corner of the automobile shed.

“Whatever will we bail with?” asked Billy, finding the skiff already to have taken considerable water.

“I know,” came a prompt answer and Slider disappeared in the darkness. From behind the garage he brought in a few seconds two empty tin cans. “There’s no end of ’em among some weeds back there if we need more,” he said.

“No! You keep bailing, Chip, and you, Billy, hold the lights! Off we go!” and Phil shoved

away the moment all were fairly on board. From the black shore line to the east they could see the campfire shedding a bright light for a little distance over the waters; but except for this and the rays of the auto lamps Worth held the darkness was like pitch.

"Paul's blaze will be our light-house. We want to hit toward the middle of the lake, just about opposite the camp, then straight over to the far side," spoke Way, breathing fast. "Keep me guided right, Bill." He was pulling hard.

The incoming water kept Slider more than busy. With a can in each hand he scooped to right and left. Worth found it necessary to give Phil very few directions for Way was a splendid oarsman and the light craft swept forward rapidly.

Every minute or two Billy sang out Mac-Lester's name. Eagerly he scanned the water as far as the lamp rays fell, but heard nothing, saw nothing.

Not until the north shore was almost reached did Phil slow down. Then he let the boat drift forward easily while watching for a landing place. "Raise the lamp higher," he called over his shoulder.

Billy did so and as the skiff floated nearer the quite steep bank rising from the water at this point, there came suddenly into the lighted circle a flat bottomed fishing boat. It was the scow MacLester had used and it was empty.

CHAPTER XIX

IS NO NEWS GOOD NEWS?

The fishing boat lay drifting, but only three or four yards from shore. Had Dave effected a landing or, in the darkness, had he tried and failed? That which quite possibly, even probably, had happened was a thought that filled even Phil with apprehension and despair.

“Light the way! I’ll pull close in shore,” he said, trying hard to swallow the lump in his throat.

The bank where the skiff’s nose soon touched was steep, yet easy to be climbed as its height was only a few feet. But there was no sign that anyone had been near it. Otherwise the dry earth would have shown the imprints of toes or heels. This was quickly proved when, Phil steadying the boat and with a root and a

straggling shrub to help him, Billy crept quickly to the top.

"Still, we don't know just where Dave may have run in. It's queer that he let the scow drift, if—even if he expected to go right back," said Worth in a hushed tone, from the edge of the low bluff.

"Queer what became of the man who called him over here, if such a thing as Mac falling into the water may have happened," observed Phil. "And Dave could swim—why, almost across the lake, if he had to! He could save himself if there was nobody pulling him down."

Throwing Billy a line by which to hold the boat, Way and Slider followed him up the bank. They walked some distance in each direction along the shore but the feeble light of the oil lamps showed no trace of David MacLester nor yet of the mysterious person who had summoned him. The thought, "crooked work," was in the minds of all three.

"After all, it's the water I'm most afraid of.

If Dave fell and hurt himself or was pushed into the lake—but never mind. One of us must go back to Paul and the others will have to—look further,” said Phil at last.

Billy was chosen to return to camp. What Phil meant to do, with Slider’s help, was drag the lake in this vicinity. If Dave had gone to the bottom, due to some accident or injury, it might not yet be too late to save his life. Such things had been done, Way said, but he spoke without his usual confidence and very, very gloomily.

Returning to the skiff, the boys ran along side the fishing boat and drew the latter to shore. Phil and Chip tied her to a projecting root and Worth bade them good-bye.

With a long, steady stroke he pulled for the southern shore and the bright light blazing there. But it is one thing to row for the fun of it, when the sunlight dances on the ripples, and quite another to cross a strange body of

water—and alone—when inky darkness spreads everywhere.

The swelling of the wood had now pretty well stopped the skiff's leaking, yet again and again Billy paused to bail out. The unpleasant thought that he would find the water pouring in too fast for his best efforts harassed him. He could not see, so he often put down his hand to feel and thus make sure the boat was not filling. So at last did he float into the rays of the campfire's light and a minute later stand telling Paul the unhappy discoveries made.

The thought that Dave and the strange man, having found their boat drifting beyond reach, may have started to walk around the head of the lake and so come on foot to the camp, had suggested itself to Billy as he rowed. Mentioning this to Paul he set out, with a small camp lamp in hand, to explore the shore in the direction indicated.

Thus left alone again Jones was the most dejected and sorrowful young fellow one could

easily imagine. To keep the fire blazing high was all he could do to be of any possible assistance. Inactivity was hard for him to bear at any time. Especially was it hard when his thoughts were so disturbed and his anxiety so great.

It was coming daylight when at last Jones saw the fishing boat approaching. In it were Phil and Billy and Chip; for Worth, having traversed the whole upper boarder of the lake without result other than to tire himself exceedingly, had spent all the latter part of the night with Way and Slider.

To the great astonishment of these two he had suddenly appeared to them out of the darkness. He had broken his lamp to bits in a painful tumble into a dry water course the undergrowth concealed.

Several hours the three lads had then spent alternately dragging the lake's bottom with hooked poles, looking up and down the steep bank for footprints, and here and there going

some distance back into the woods vainly searching. Even before the dawn appeared their lamps went out. With difficulty they had then embarked for the opposite shore. Daylight came as wearily they worked their heavy craft forward.

The one hopeful fact the boys found in a sorrowful review of the situation, as they stretched their tired limbs upon the ground, was that the dragging of the lake in the vicinity where Dave's empty boat was found had been without result.

"We'll get some rest—a few minutes, anyway, and a cup of coffee, then we'll see what daylight will do to help us," suggested Phil.

Yet it was scarcely more than sunrise when the search was resumed. Crossing to the north shore in the skiff, Billy and Paul set about a minute inspection of the dry earth of the bank and of the woods for a long distance up and down the water's edge. Leaving Slider in camp, Phil made the detour of the east shore on foot.

As Way drew near the scene of the fruitless work of the night he discovered close in shore an old log lying just under the water's surface and partially imbedded in the earth of the bank. A short, stubby branch projected its wet and slimy tip an inch or two above the water. A splintered end that had risen considerably higher was freshly broken. Not completely detached, it lay almost level with the water's surface.

But a more interesting discovery still was unmistakable footprints in the dry earth. The footprints were made by MacLester. Of this Phil was certain. It was to the large projecting splinter, broken from the old log, that Dave had tied the boat, perhaps. Yet how had the slow and heavy craft broken from its mooring? And what was of vastly more consequence what had then happened to Mac?

The scene of Way's discoveries was some distance from the spot in which the fishing boat had been found. It was farther to the east,

also, than search along the bank had been carried during the night; but the lake at this point had been dragged again.

Examining the ground carefully, Phil sought to find some further evidence concerning the missing boy's movements. He discovered nothing of importance. Going forward, then, to Billy and Paul, now working toward the westerly end of the lake, he told them of his discoveries. Quickly they returned with him.

To make their search thorough the three boys undertook to inspect the ground covering a wide area at this point where they believed their friend had landed. Several hundred feet from the water they made an interesting discovery. In a little patch of earth, made bare by the burrowing of some small animal, there were three footprints. One showed the mark of a shoe such as Dave MacLester wore. Two other tracks were broad and heavy—the imprints of coarser footwear.

It was a marked relief to the three chums

to find such good cause to believe MacLester was not drowned; but what in the world had become of him? Had he been enticed away? Had he been taken captive by some unknown enemy?

In vain the search for other footprints,—anything to cast additional light on the grievous problems,—was carried further. Every prospect ended in disappointment. It was long after noon. The boys had penetrated several miles into the woods and they at last acknowledged themselves completely baffled.

Murky was a name they often mentioned as they counselled together. They could think of no one else who might have a reason for doing them all an injury. But why should Murky wish to make Dave or any of them a prisoner? His only motive could be that he feared they were seaching for the stolen money he considered as his own. He had warned Chip Slider to keep off that track, the boys knew.

“We’ll hunt till dark, then if we have no success and get no word at all, we will get the

sheriff and a lot of men from Staretta! We will find Dave and it won't be very pleasant for Murky or whoever is to blame for this," declared Way. "There's more back of the whole matter than we can make out—more than we can even guess right now, you'll see!"

The boys returned to camp. The thought had come to them many times that Chip Slider might know a great deal more than he had told. They remembered Link Fraley's words about the boy. But they could not accuse him without any ground for doing so. They could find no evidence that Mac's disappearance had not occurred just as Chip had told them. And he had twice repeated the whole story the same as in the beginning.

It was a heart-sick group that ate a hasty lunch of bread and coffee in the woodland camp. Now for the first time, however, Paul told of the lonely time he had had during the long night—told of the noises he had heard in the distance, along the beach. He was quite

sure that bears and deer, as well, to say nothing of numerous smaller creatures, had come to the lake to drink and bathe. He believed they would have come quite close to the shack but for the bright fire he kept blazing.

Ordinarily the boys would have found great interest in such a subject; but today their spirits were at too low an ebb, their minds too disturbed over the unaccountable loss of their friend to permit their attention being otherwise occupied.

All except Billy set out after lunch to learn whether the suspected Murky had deserted his usual hiding-place. Slider was the guide. He led the others quite directly to the logs where the tramp had made his bed and headquarters.

The fellow had apparently departed. He had left the pan and other utensils taken from the boys' camp but the blankets he had carried with him. They were nowhere to be seen, at any rate.

More certain than ever, then, that it was this

unscrupulous villain who had decoyed Dave across the lake and in some manner forced their friend to accompany him, the lads hurried back to camp.

Again they rowed to the north shore and with utmost determination plunged into the hot, close woods.

CHAPTER XX

THE LONG-HIDDEN TREASURE IS UNCOVERED

And now, while the weary young searchers were hastening resolutely into the woods to the north of the lake, they were leaving in the forest to the south one who would well bear watching. I do not mean Chip Slider sitting alone, tired and melancholy, beside the shelter of poles, wondering if there could possibly be any place where trouble did not come. No—not Chip, but a man who at this moment stood looking into the little valley where the last camp of the road builders had been.

A somewhat portly, somewhat pompous and self-important appearing individual was this man. His bristly hair, cut very short, was tinged with gray under the large, loose-fitting cap such as golfers and motorists wear. His face was smooth, puffy and red. His very

eyes, more touched with red, also, than they should have been, as well as his pudgy hands indicated self-indulgence and love of ease.

Presently the cap and the person under it moved from the rise of ground, above the road builders' last camp, down into the valley. With a smile that had too much of a sneer about it to be pleasant, the man ground his heel into the gravel where the Longknives' road had come to its troubled ending. With the same disagreeable sneer in his manner that accompanied his unpleasant smile, he turned here and there, noting how the brush and stunted stalks of mullen were springing up all about the unfinished task the workmen had left.

Startled suddenly out of his reverie by a bluejay's scream, or some other noise—he may have fancied it, he thought—the man looked hastily, searchingly about him; but satisfied, apparently, that he was alone, he moved leisurely into a shaded place and sat himself down on a stump—another token of the great road

that had been begun but never completed. Quite carefully he drew up his trousers at the knees, then picked from his hosiery, whose bright color showed in considerable expanse above his oxfords, some bits of dry grass and pine needles gathered in his walk. Mr. Lewis Grandall had come, apparently, to view the work his perfidy had caused to be abandoned.

For a long time the unfaithful treasurer of the ambitious Longknives sat in silent meditation. He had noted with some satisfaction that a growth of brush screened his position from easy discovery should anyone chance to pass that way; and now his thoughts ran back over the circumstances leading up to his present personal situation. Quite steadily his eyes were fixed upon the unleveled bank of gravel, the half-hewn logs and all the unfinished work in the general picture of desolation and abandonment before him.

It is doubtful, perhaps, if Grandall realized his own responsibility for the waste and ruin

on which he looked. At least his face bore no trace of sorrow, no expression of sincere regret. The same dull sneer was in his eyes, the same defiant air was in even the poise of his body and the heel that, with a certain viciousness, he dug into the dry earth.

Lewis Grandall's start in life had been attended by bright prospects. If only he had been found out the first time he yielded to temptation in scheming to get money by dishonest means, he might still have made his life a success by turning at once to the right road; but not being detected, he became bolder. From mere trickery and deceit it is but a step to out-and-out thievery. Grandall took that step and more. Yet he managed for long to cover his tracks sufficiently that few suspected and no one publicly accused.

One would have supposed that, being accustomed to the handling of other people's money in his banking work, he would not easily have been tempted when he found himself with a

large sum of the Longknives' funds in his possession. Neither had he any pressing need of this money at the time he laid his plan to appropriate to his own use the cash intended for Nels Anderson's army of road builders. He merely thought he might some day be glad to have at his command a secret reserve large enough to maintain him indefinitely.

So did he plan the pretended robbery by which a former woodsman he had long known made off with the suit-case wherein he carried the money for Anderson's long overdue payroll. His original purpose had been to make some sort of division of the cash with Murky; but there was not anywhere in the Grandall code either honor or honesty. It was a particularly bright idea, indeed, so Grandall himself considered when the thought came to him that he might have the unsuspecting Murky relieved of the suit-case before the fellow had so much as seen what was in it.

The plan was put into effect. Slider, weak

of morals, but strong of arm, was chosen for the work. To him Grandall told as much of his whole scheme as he thought necessary, but told him nothing whatever that was wholly true, with the possible exception of the statement that Murky was not to be trusted because he talked too much.

Having been a beneficiary in a small but largely crooked lumber deal Grandall had once managed, Slider entered into the robbery scheme most willingly. With the general result the reader is familiar; but in detail it may be added that, in keeping with the promoter's plan, he who relieved Murky of the suit-case hid it later just where few would suspect it might be hidden.

That place was almost within gunshot of the very spot where the money would have been distributed had it reached those for whom it was intended. This not only suited Mr. Grandall's convenience, but kept Slider in a comparatively safe locality, as well. So many men

had been engaged on the work near Opal Lake that the presence of any kind of person in working clothes, in that vicinity, would occasion no remark.

Thus had Slider secreted the suit-case in a decaying heap of drift along the identical little stream beside which the great gravel road had ended. There had Grandall found and quietly removed the riches the very next day. Then the dishonest treasurer limped back to his hotel, for he was supposed to be scarcely able to move, owing to his "injuries," as a result of the robbery.

Nearly three years passed. The suit-case lay undisturbed where Grandall hid it and its valuable contents were intact. If the Longknives' treasurer had had occasion to make use of this money, meanwhile, he had been either afraid or unwilling to do so. But he knew where it was. He knew that in an emergency he could lay hands on a moderate fortune whose existence he believed none suspected.

The thought bolstered his courage in scheming the method of more than one piece of trickery and dishonesty.

Then came the end, as sooner or later in crooked plans it must come—Failure! They all fail,—it is inevitable,—at last. The wrong-doer faced the necessity of flight.

Grandall's defalcations in the bank did not appear at once. A small matter—the "padding" or falsely increasing of some petty bills for material furnished the city—had started an investigation. It was to the amazement of everyone who knew the man that a long, long chain of shady operations and even petty stealing, even the robbery of his own friends, was by slow degrees uncovered.

Toward the last, it was apparent, Grandall had been driven to the most painful desperation. Night and day he must be on guard to keep his deceptions covered up. Constantly he must devise new practices in deceit to conceal others that once had served, but now, daily and hourly,

were opening at most unexpected points revealing the treachery, falsehood, hypocrisy and rottenness they erstwhile had secreted.

Like a common thief, the guilty Grandall stole away in the night. Behind him he left all that might have made life useful and pleasant—home, friends, hope and ambition. Lying for some time hidden in a distant city, he at last felt it safe to travel by a circuitous route to Opal Lake.

At a country railroad station he stepped quietly off the train. With no luggage but a small handbag he slipped into the woods. A long tramp brought him the following day to the abandoned clubhouse. The very atmosphere of oppressive loneliness there pleased him because of its assurance of his safety from discovery.

How little Grandall guessed, or even suspected, that at just this time he could not have come to a place more fraught with danger to himself will never be known. No knowledge

had he of the eyes that stealthily watched him. No thought had he that the moment he appeared with the stolen suit-case in hand, ready to slip away to hoped-for safety in a distant country, a lurking enemy would leap upon him.

The thief sat for a long time contemplating the ruins where so abruptly the road building had ended. It was not until near evening that he strolled slowly toward the clubhouse. The general course of the gravel drive he followed, but in the main kept a few feet to one side, that the trees and brush might screen him.

He had no fear here, yet he knew some boys were in camp not far away and not even by them did he wish to be observed. For he would spend one night of rest in the clubhouse room that once had been his own; and then he would be away—gone for all time from these and all the scenes of his younger life.

Yet a pair of heavy, scowling eyes watched Grandall's every footstep—saw him enter the clubhouse—saw him seat himself restfully in

the empty living-room beside the great fireplace and proceed to make a supper of sandwiches and fruit from his small satchel.

Murky could not have been more vigilant had his own life been at stake. Not only his determination to gain again the stolen money that had been taken from him, but his hatred of that person the victim of whose double dealing he had been, made him watchful, and a very dangerous man.

Quite suddenly in the afternoon had the vexed and oft-disappointed tramp discovered Grandall. It was while the latter stood beside the ruins where the gravel road had reached its ending. In delighted surprise Murky with difficulty suppressed a cry. Dropping instantly to the ground, he pressed over his mouth both his dirty hands lest some exclamation he could scarcely resist should betray him. "Blame *me!*" Under his breath he muttered the words with almost fiendish pleasure.

His worst enemy then was the occasion of

those sounds that had startled Grandall from his reverie. But he felt himself so entirely alone, so wholly free from any probability of being observed, that he had given the slight noise not a second thought. During all his afternoon of sinister gazing upon the ambitious enterprise his act had wrecked, he still believed himself as completely alone as a man well could be in any vast woods or wilderness.

And even when Grandall left the little valley and walked in silent meditation to spend one night more—but one—in the old house on the Point he heard no footsteps coming on behind. His thoughts were far from pleasant ones but they occupied him fully. The sullen hatred so clearly shown in the expression of his eyes and lips was but a reflection of all that passed within his mind. Friends or foes, men were all alike to him, and those who had never voiced a word against him he reviled equally with those who had been his dupes, and with the

men whose accusations had caused his flight, as well.

Coming to the clubhouse, Grandall lingered for a time up and down the weed-grown walk leading to the garage. Then while it was yet light he went down to the rotting pier and looked long and earnestly across and up and down the lake. Slowly he returned and, entering the house, went at once down cellar.

In the pitch darkness he felt his way to the rear of the steps leading from above. Striking a match or two, he examined by such flickering flames the rough uneven wall. With bare hands, then, he seized a projecting corner of one of the large flat stones and pulled it easily from place.

If this part of the wall had been laid up with cement or mortar it had been broken down some time before, as would appear very probable, for the masonry that Grandall now brought tumbling to the floor concealed a deep aperture in the dry, sandy earth.

The thief's next lighted match revealed the hole and also revealed a damp and discolored leather case.

Still crouching in the dark cellar Grandall managed to work the rusty lock and lay the suit-case open. Then he struck another match and its dim glow disclosed the carefully packed bundles of bills, and among them a bag of coin. He nodded his head in a satisfied way. He had assured himself on first arriving at the old house that the treasure was safe; but he would not remove it from the hiding place until he was prepared to leave, he had decided. Now he was ready.

And where was Murky?

As a matter of fact, from his concealment among the bushes near by, he was trying to decipher the room upstairs that this lone visitor to the old house would probably occupy. He had lost sight of Grandall when the latter had quickly entered and gone to the cellar. But it was only for a little while that the scowling

eyes searched the open door and the windows in vain.

As Grandall came up to the living-room carrying the discolored suit-case, he glanced quickly all about him. Possibly some sense of his guilt came to his mind now that the evidence of his theft was squarely in his hands, and for the first time he appeared apprehensive. Yet he paused only for a few seconds. He saw to it that all the first floor doors were bolted from within, and slowly climbed the stairs to the sleeping rooms above.

As if quite at home the man entered that room whose long, low window opened upon the little balcony toward the lake. He smoothed down the mattress and brought a blanket from an adjoining chamber. Opening the window wide, for these upper rooms were very close and warm, he drew the suit-case to the better light he thus admitted and proceeded to count the money it contained.

The night was hot, the air seemed stifling,

but when he had satisfied himself as to the amount of the treasure, Grandall returned the packages of bills and the bag of gold and silver pieces to their places, then closed and locked the window. He locked his chamber door also, before lying down to sleep. As if that could save him now!

CHAPTER XXI

DAVE MACLESTER'S ADVENTURE

It required no little courage for Dave MacLester to row across the dark waters of the lake to the darker woods of the north shore. Had there been someone to go with him he would have answered the cries for aid much more willingly. But since either he or Chip must remain in camp, Davy set out alone, pretty gloomily, pulling the heavy scow with what speed he could.

MacLester was far from being a coward but by nature he was more timid than calm, self-possessed Phil Way, or bold and venturesome Paul Jones. With a keen sense of duty and resolute determination to overcome every thought of fear, however, he ran the scow against the steep bank of the lake's far shore.

The voice that had guided Dave across the

water greeted him at once. "It's full glad I am to see ye, even if I can't see ye half in the darkness of it," came with a pronounced Irish accent.

"Guess that won't make much difference if you can see your way into the boat," Dave answered. "Did you get lost?"

"No, no! not lost at all, at all, but I couldn't find me way, quite," came the response. The speaker had now come down on the sloping bank close to the boat, as if about to step aboard.

"I only wondered," Dave answered. "Seems as if the woods were full of mysterious people—one lone man hiding in an old clubhouse, another—" The lad checked himself. A sudden thought came to him that perhaps he better not speak too freely without knowing with whom he was talking.

"What's he doin' there? A man all alone, and in an old clubhouse? What might be his name thin?"

“How should I know?” Dave answered to this question. He was becoming the least bit suspicious and again he checked himself when it was just at his tongue’s tip to add, “We think the name may be Grandall.” There would be no harm in awaiting developments before he told a stranger quite all he knew, he grimly reflected—a wise thought, it should be needless to say.

“No harm,—no harm intinded,” spoke the Irishman good-naturedly. He had come close to the water’s edge now and Dave’s eyes being fairly accustomed to the darkness, made him out to be a little, elderly man with a short beard, but very little hair on his head. The old fellow’s baldness was, indeed, the most noticeable thing about him as, with hat in hand, lest it fall off into the lake, perhaps, he stooped down the more closely to inspect MacLester and the boat.

“Why,” said the boy, fearing his short “How should I know?” might have been unpleasantly curt, “You see there are four of us fellows in camp on t’other side and we’ve

happened to see a man at the old house on the Point below us. We've wondered who he might be, staying alone as he does, and keeping so out of sight of everybody. It's miles to the nearest house and nobody but our crowd of four fellows and our one visitor is anywhere near. But climb down into the scow and I'll take you over. Steady now, while I hold the old shell up to the bank."

For a few seconds the stranger made no reply. Then—"It must be a lake here thin. Has it a name, at all, d'ye know?"

"Why, sure it's a lake!" replied Dave a little tartly, wondering if the old fellow supposed the sheet of water lying so quiet in the darkness there might be a river or an ocean. "It's name is Opal Lake. This old boat is good and strong though. It'll carry us across all right."

Once again there was a long pause before the stranger spoke. "Oh yis!" he suddenly exclaimed, "There's me baggage, and me almost

forgettin' of it! Will ye help me a wee bit with it? Sure 'tis not far!"

The kindly and somewhat coaxing voice of the old fellow, whose brogue was just enough to give a pleasant quaintness to his speech, amused MacLester and he assented readily enough to the request made of him. He threw a loop of the scow's anchor rope over a stub projecting from the water and sprang ashore. He did not notice in the darkness that his leap broke the fragile branch securing the boat, allowing her to drift, but at once said:

"We'll have to wiggle some, for they'll be looking for me in camp pretty shortly."

"Sure, 'tis not far," the man again said pleasantly, and clapping his straw hat down over his head till it almost concealed his ears, he led the way into the woods.

"Me name is Smith—Jawn Smith. What's your'n thin?" spoke the genial Irishman, as the two walked quite rapidly, despite the darkness.

"MacLester—I'm Scotch," said Dave, smiling to himself over the thought that his new friend plainly was not French.

Mr. Smith made no reply and a long distance had been covered when Dave spoke again.

"How far back are you—that is, your baggage? We'll never find the lake again, till morning, if we don't watch out."

"Sure, 'tis not far now any more," came the quite unsatisfactory answer. "Is it tired ye air?"

"No—but—great guns!"

With no other remark Dave continued close behind or alongside his guide for a long time—a very long time, it seemed to him,—possibly a quarter hour. Then—

"Where in the world are we bound for?" he asked pretty sharply.

"Sure, ye'll not lave me," was the answer, quite pleadingly.

With a decided mixture of feelings Dave said, "Couldn't you do without your baggage until

morning?" But in his thoughts he added: "I've heard of wild Irishmen, and I guess I've met one, too." Still, he smiled in a grim way, reflecting further that he, also, would have a stirring personal adventure to report in camp, and he would see it through now at all hazards.

MacLester was certainly right. He would have a story of personal adventure to relate when he parted company with "Jawn Smith." But this was something he was not to succeed in doing so soon as he supposed.

Time passed and still the little, old fellow with now and again his oft-repeated, "'Tis not far," trudged onward. He *seemed* to know the way perfectly. Dave followed or kept near his side. However, when for possibly the tenth time the man said, "'Tis not far," the lad's impatience got the better of him.

"Your ideas of distance must have been picked up in an automobile," he said. "Twenty miles isn't far in a car, maybe. One or two—not to mention five or six—may be a lot better

than a fair stretch for walking. And I've been gone a long time from camp."

The stranger made no reply.

"What are you doing in the woods—fishing, or just traveling for your health?" Dave was getting more than a little cross and his tone showed it.

"Sure, thin, I was goin' to tell ye," muttered Mr. Smith, still going forward but more slowly now,—“I was goin' to tell ye that me business is that of a sivy-ear—you know?"

"A what? I'm afraid I don't know exactly."

"You don't know a sivy-ear? Sure! Peekin' through a little popgun on three poles? That's a sivy-ear."

"Oh, a surveyor!" exclaimed Dave. "What in the world have you been surveying here in the woods?"

"Down't be axin' questions. Sivy-ears go peekin' an' peekin' an' they don't tell whatever they may see. For why should there be sivy-

ears at all, if they towld what they do be seein'?"

MacLester was both irritated and amused; but he was getting too uneasy now to let the all-too-apparent humbuggery of his companion go unchallenged.

"Well, I'll say this much, Mr. Smith, that if you know where your instruments are, and can go there right off, I'll stand by my bargain to help you; but if you don't, you better say so. We're five miles from the lake now, if we're a foot."

"Yes, it's right ye air," was the still unsatisfactory answer. And though Dave replied more sharply than he had yet spoken, his companion each time responded in soft tones and mild language, but always evasively.

"Well! if you know where we are, tell me that!" spoke MacLester very firmly at last. "I'm going not a step further until I know what sort of a wild goose business you are taking me on!"

"Oh,—oh! Sorra day—sorra day!" The man sat himself down heavily upon a fallen tree over whose prostrate trunk he had just escaped falling. "Ye must do as ye will, but it's lost I fear I am."

"Lost?" echoed Dave loudly. "You don't mean that we've been jamming ahead in the dark, and all this distance, without knowing where we were going?"

"It was *not far!*" Mr. Smith moaned wearily. "Oh! it is tired am I!"

"Well! I'll be cow-kicked!"

And possibly David MacLester may be excused for using so impolite an expression when his situation is considered. Here he was miles from Opal Lake—miles from camp, and lost in the woods in the dead of night with a strange man who might be either a dangerous crook or a harmless lunatic—circumstances pointed toward both.

"Ye'll not be blamin' *me*, sure!" spoke the old fellow. His very voice showed that he was

indeed tired to the verge of fainting; but his manner was as mild and child-like as his words.

Language could not express Dave's feelings. In mute contempt, anger, weariness and a certain deep curiosity mingled, he dropped to the ground.

"I wouldn't blame you, mister," said the boy at last, "but I set out to do you a friendly turn and you get me into this pickle as a result and still give me no satisfaction as to where you belong or where you want to get to."

"Jawn Smith"—and it plainly was not his name—made no answer for a long time. Meanwhile David expressed himself pretty freely to the effect that there was but one course to pursue and that was to stay right where they were until morning. "And when daylight comes we'll head straight for the lake," said he.

"It's no odds who I be," said the stranger finally. "If I be not a real sivy-ear, I'm the likes of one, a peekin' and peekin'. Which is for why I can't be gossipin' about matters that

means a great deal to them that I would be befriending'. Come mornin', we'll see."

"Humph! Hope we may see more than we do this minute," Dave answered. For although the two had been so long in the darkness that they could make out trees and other objects well enough to avoid them, it had been a very hard as well as a long tramp and the more so because of the gloom of night.

His head pillowed on his arm Dave fell asleep, at last, regardless of the many things that vexed and worried him. His queer companion slept also and so did the daylight find them sore and hungry. The sun's rays brightened their spirits, but "you can't eat sunbeams," as Mac-Lester rather gloomily remarked. The first excitement of the adventure had subsided now and he was quite inclined to despondency.

On the strength of the stranger's statement that his camp and baggage and food he carried could be found in a short time Dave again let him lead the way. A long walk in one direction

was followed by a tramp of a still greater distance in another with no apparent intention of arriving anywhere.

And both MacLester and the stranger were suffering for water. They had crossed a small stream where there were still pools of good water, notwithstanding the severe drouth, early in the morning. It was decided to revisit it before starting for the lake. But here, too, long-continued efforts were a flat failure.

It is a dreadful feeling to realize that you know not which way to turn to reach any given point. Lost! It is a word whose terrors must be experienced to be fully understood.

“Come, now! I’ll be the guide, and just you keep with me. We’ll get out of here somehow,” said MacLester resolutely. Thus far the stranger, for the most part, had been the pilot. It was past noon. Neither had tasted food since the preceding day and both were parched for water. The sun beat down till even through the

thick screen of pine and deciduous branches the heat was trying. No bit of breeze relieved the sultriness.

But Dave's best efforts seemed fruitless. The only reward in a long, long tramp was to lead the weary pair to a small stream. But even this was a most fortunate discovery and both drank freely, then drank again.

As they rested the stranger was much depressed. After a long silence he said in hopeless tones: "What for a man ye may think me, I dunno; but the saints bear me witness, me bye, never did I sit out to drag ye where ye be. It's all past goin' further I am, and ye've got to lave me. An' if ever at last ye come to that lake, go right at wanst to that clubhouse and tell the gentleman who's stoppin' there, for the love of hivin' to come quickly where I be. It's Daddy O'Lear that wants him, say—poor—poor Daddy O'Lear."

"What's that?" exclaimed MacLester. "Now

if this *ain't* a pretty mess! I was sure your name wasn't Smith, but——”

“An' I'll be staying thin, till ye come fer me; but ye'll be tellin' nobody but the wan man that I'm here, be sure.”

“You are going along with me,” was the decisive answer. “Then I'll tell no one anything. I don't want anything to do with your friend. There's a way out of this howling wilderness somehow! We've got to move! It will be dark again in two hours!”

But even a strong tugging at his arm would not persuade Mr. O'Lear, if such were his real name, to rise and start.

“You go with me or you'll go to jail where someone else ought to be too, if I'm not mistaken,” said Dave with emphasis. “You can't stay here, man! And whoever you are, I'm not going to let you!”

It was of the man in the clubhouse that MacLester was thinking; but however bad a char-

acter that person might be, the certain fact remained that "Daddy O'Lear" might very easily starve before he, or any sort of a rescue party, could find him were he left alone as he proposed.

CHAPTER XXII

“THE LAKE! IT’S THE ONLY CHANCE OF ESCAPE!”

The sun went down and the coming darkness warned the three boys, vainly searching for Dave MacLester, that they must hurry if they were to find their way to camp. If no success had attended them by daylight, they certainly could hope to do nothing after nightfall, and they turned back toward the lake.

All afternoon Phil, Billy and Paul had tramped the woods. Except for the three tracks in some soft earth, as earlier mentioned, not one certain clue to the direction taken by Dave and his unknown companion had the friends found.

Quite worn out in both body and mind, they took careful note of their bearings, then headed by what they thought a bee-line for Opal Lake. On and on they hurried. The twilight deepened

and they kept to a direct course with difficulty. And still they reached neither the lake nor any familiar spot.

"Fine boat we're in if we've gone and got lost," gasped Paul, bringing up the rear. The boys were pushing forward at a slow run, Phil Way in the lead.

"We didn't pay close enough attention to the distance, when we were going the other way; but we'll be out of this in a little while now," came Way's hopeful answer.

"I smell smoke. It might be from our own camp. Chip would be firing up like mad to make a bright blaze," came Billy's voice above the steady patter of feet upon the needle-strewn ground.

"There's some breeze picking up, but not quite from that direction," said Phil, though he paused not a moment.

Paul was first to discover that the course Way was taking could not be right. "I can catch the smell of the swampy ground, at the west end of



"Great heavens! It's Lew Grandall!" cried the stranger
on the raft.

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the lake, in the wind," he said. "We've got to head right against this breeze."

A brief pause, and the lads agreed that Paul was right. And soon the proof was positive. Ten minutes of rapid walking brought the chums to the water, but it was at the east end of the lake, not the north shore, at which they found themselves. Another half mile or less would have taken them entirely beyond the familiar sheet of water, and have led them, hopelessly lost, undoubtedly into the woods to the south. Their course had been steered too far easterly in the beginning.

Glad, indeed, to be so near their camp once more, despite the weight upon their hearts concerning Dave, the boys agreed to continue on around the upper end of the lake on foot rather than return now for the skiff on the more distant shore. So did they come presently to their shack and the bright blaze Chip Slider had burning as a beacon light for them.

The ray of hope the young searchers held out

to one another on their homeward way, that they might find MacLester safe and sound in camp upon their own arrival there, was quickly turned to disappointment. Chip had no news—not one word of information, good or bad, to report. He had remained faithfully in camp and had seen nothing, heard nothing unusual.

“Exceptin’,” said he, “there’s bad fires somewheres in the woods. I smelled smoke the minute the wind began blowin’. All day there wasn’t hide nor hair of air a stirrin’. It was just after sundown that it started in, real gentle, an’ it’s gettin’ higher. You take a fire in the woods, and a stiff gale, and you’ve got something to look out for, I tell you.”

“We’ve got to rest and think a little, and have something to eat,” said Phil, paying scant attention to Slider’s words. “We’ve done what we can in one direction, now we must start out on some other plan.”

“I knowed you’d be hungry and I’ve got the coffee hot. I boiled some eggs and cooled ’em

this afternoon and them are ready, too. Just you all rest and I'll get some kind of supper," announced Slider, almost bashfully. But his friends were truly glad to do as he suggested. The simple, hasty meal of cold, hard-boiled eggs with plenty of bread and butter, crackers and cheese and coffee would have been most enjoyable too, had there been no absent one.

For an hour or two the three Auto Boys rested and sought to find the best plan to pursue toward finding Dave MacLester. They could not do better, they at last felt sure, than to report their mystery to the authorities at Star-etta.

From the town, also, inquiries among the villages lying beyond the great woods could be made by telegraph or, even better, by telephone, perhaps. If Dave had been foully dealt with, as seemed only too probable, the law's officials could not be any too quickly informed.

It was drawing on toward midnight when the Thirty's lamps were lighted, the engine started

and all made ready for a rapid run to the town. Phil took the wheel. Telling Slider to keep a bright blaze shining and his ears wide open for any signal from over the lake, he threw in the gear, let the clutch take hold, and the three boys began this last bit of service they were ever to have from their much beloved car.

Way was usually a conservative driver but tonight his foot at no time ceased to press the pedal that increased the gas. Over the smooth spots and over the rough ones, ruts, roots and hummocks of the hard-baked earth, the automobile whirred. Rarely did the speedometer show less than fifteen miles and often the indicator touched twenty-five, and this while the road was still but the woodland trail.

Luckily the lights were clear and bright, but more fortunate still, Phil was every moment alert and earnestly attentive to every inch of the road and every throb of the machine.

Like some swift phantom the blaze of the lamps sped on and on among the ever retreating

shadows and utter blackness of the night. Like black-hooded spectres the trees at either side seemed to glide ever to the rear, silent and ghostly except as their branches were tossed by the rising wind.

It was not until they were far past the bleak, dark house of Nels Anderson, that Billy shouted his opinion that inquiry should have been made there. No, Phil called with emphasis, the time for giving heed to uncertain, unknown persons had passed. He was sorry the arrest of Murky and of Grandall had not been brought about when first it was suggested, he said. A lot of things might have turned out differently if it had been done, and he, at least, believed——

“Look! There’s sure fire yonder!” It was Paul’s voice interrupting.

The car was fairly clear of the woods and the road now led among the blackened stumps and rough undergrowth of the district where flames had raged in time long past.

Far to the west and north the sky was blazing

red. The whole distant horizon of the direction named seemed as if the doors of some mighty, seething furnace, miles in width, stood open. A rank odor of burning wood came stronger and stronger on the gusts of wind.

"It's a good ways off and maybe isn't burning much this way," shouted Worth above the rush of air and whirl of the auto's wheels.

"The wind, man! It's sweeping right into the heart of the woods," Phil answered loudly. But not for a moment did the car slacken speed. The road was getting better. Staretta was but five miles distant.

"Still, there's not much danger of the fire coming our way. It will go way north of the lake," Worth replied.

"And that's just the direction Mac's in," echoed Paul Jones in tones of alarm.

"Yes!"

Phil cut the word quick and short. His tone and the instantly still greater speed of the car

told all too plainly where his fears were running.

There was no need to rouse Link Fraley or the officers of Staretta. They were astir watching the progress of the distant flames. Scores of men had already gone to join the fire fighters, who, it was reported, had reached the scene from Jacques' Mills, a settlement to the northwest that lay in great danger, should the wind change.

The fire had been noticed only as clouds of smoke during the day, Link Fraley said. In the afternoon messengers arrived saying that the blaze was gaining great headway. It might yet be confined to a certain swampy district, thick with dead trees and grass and a rank undergrowth of rushes, now dry as tinder from the long drouth. It was here the fire had started. Many men returned with the bearer of the news to aid in the battle.

With sundown came the wind. There could be no stopping of the terrible destruction so

long as the gale increased, Link Fraley stated. The best that any could hope for was that the blaze could be kept within a narrow limit as it swept onward into the wholly unsettled country so saving the little towns and mills along the railroad line.

But about MacLester—the hearts of the three boys sank like lead. Even Sheriff Larsen said nothing could be done for him while so great a number of lives were in jeopardy and every hand was needed to preserve them. He was sorry—very sorry; but he believed and hoped Dave would escape in safety, somehow, though there was not a thing that anyone could do at once to help him or to aid his friends in finding him.

Perhaps he had been lured into the woods for purposes of robbery, or by Murky, in a spirit of revenge; but even the much-needed attention of the law to that dangerous character must wait, the sheriff said, until the great fire could in some degree be overcome.

Awed and alarmed, their every nerve tense with a depth of interest and anxiety such as few ever experience, the three friends listened to the conversation of those about them. The principal crowd had gathered before Fraley's store. Suddenly, from the partially lighted interior, Link Fraley came. With a nod of his head he beckoned the Auto Boys aside.

"An Indian fellow—Doughnut Dan, they call him—has just come in from up the line," said he, "and brings word that the fire will get south of Opal Lake and no stoppin' it. Hadn't ye better go? Right now you'll be ahead of it to the lake and no danger. Later on—and ye've got that Slider chap on your hands back at your camp. Get him and get your stuff, and get 'em quick."

"But MacLester! We can't——" began Way hurriedly.

"You've *got* to! What can't be helped, can't be helped, but what *can* be—that's what you got to think about and *right off!*"

"He's dead right, Phil, bad as it is," murmured Billy sorrowfully.

"It may be, but we'll——"

Whatever Way had meant to say, he spoke no further but quickly started for the car. Paul and Billy followed and the latter took the wheel while Phil re-lighted the gas lamps and Jones gave the crank a quick, quarter turn.

When but little north of Staretta the three boys could see that all the Indian had reported was true, and more than true. If the high wind continued the whole district south of Opal Lake would be swept by the fire within the next few hours.

But even in this estimate they were falling far short of the truth. Every hour the wind blew harder. Great brands of fire were being carried forward, starting constantly, and in hundreds of places, fresh bursts of flame.

The car never traveled better than on this last night of its usefulness. In but little more than twenty minutes the boys were driving

through dense volumes of almost stifling smoke. They were now well into the woods and within the path of the flames' fiercely rapid advance.

As they went forward they discovered that the fire's main path would probably be midway between the lake and the desolate country burned over years before. But it would be spreading constantly. Nothing could check it.

Suddenly a feeble glimmer of light loomed out of the smoke and the darkness forward. It was the glow of the lamps at Nels Anderson's.

"They'll never get out alive," called Phil. "Hold up, Billy!"

By the lights of the car, and from the windows and open door of the low, unpainted house, the figures of Anderson and another man, and of Mrs. Anderson and their little girl could be seen moving hurriedly in and out. Phil sprang down to investigate.

The giant Swede, his family and their guest were carrying the household goods of every kind to the very center of the small clearing.

What they feared was all too plain. But would their efforts count for anything? Would their very lives be safe in this small space?

"I tank she will go nort of us," spoke Anderson, excitedly, as Phil approached. "She must bane most at da lake now."

Obviously he referred to the fire. Before Phil could say more than that he hoped the little clearing would escape the fire's main fury, at least, the other man came up. He was the person in the golfing cap. Way was sure of his identity instantly and his face grew hard.

"Have you been in town? How bad is this situation?" he asked calmly but with a thoroughly business air.

"Ever so bad. You'll never be safe here," the boy answered with some excitement. "You better——"

"No! the worst of it will be north of us," said the other quickly. "It came up as if the whole woods had caught fire at once. We smelled and saw the smoke in the afternoon.

Nels and I were 'way west of here to see what the danger was. We'd have been all right in this part but for the wind. But you boys—are any of your party at the lake now? Because—you'll have to move fast! Get back here to this clearing. If the fire keeps tending north you'll be far safer here than on the water. There's no telling how long it might keep you hemmed in there."

Much disturbed by the thought that even now Chip Slider might be in gravest danger, Phil said hastily, "Thank you for all you say, at least," and hurried to the car.

"The worst of this is ahead of us! Get to the lake, Billy, quick!"

Again the trusted Thirty shot forward. The fire was still too distant to be clearly seen among the trees, but the sky reflecting its red fury sent down a glow which, but for the dense smoke, would have been like early twilight. Still over ruts and roots, smooth spots and rough spots alike, Billy drove, not carelessly,

but very fast. Still the smoke-filled air grew denser.

“The man is crazy! The fire may reach the lake, but Anderson’s place will be squarely in the path of the worst of it,” cried Phil Way excitedly. The boys were nearing their camp now, and the duller glow upon the sky gave proof that the flames were more distant from here.

Poor Slider was found nearly beside himself with fear for the safety not of himself but his new-found friends. He was resolutely at his post, and the blazing campfire showed that he had not forgotten to keep going a signal to Dave MacLester that the camp was not deserted, should he chance to appear on the farther shore.

“We’re the veriest blockheads!” said Phil Way, as he looked over the lake and noted that here was the only place of real safety. “We’ve left the Andersons to be suffocated if they aren’t burned up. Who’ll go with me to bring ’em?”

"I'll go! Come on!" cried Paul, and Billy was not a second behind him.

"Wait!" Phil ordered. Then, "One of you stay here with Chip. Add all the logs you can to the raft. Make it bigger, stronger! There'll be eight of us, likely, that it will have to carry."

"Gee whiz! The car! The car, Phil! It'll be burned."

"No, it won't! Into the lake it goes. Water won't put it out of business permanently. Billy, will you stay?"

"Go ahead!" cried Worth and in five seconds Phil was driving the automobile in a way he had never done before.

Even before Anderson's place was reached the raging flames to the west of the road lit up the narrow trail with a frightful glare. But on and on the car flew.

The little clearing was reached in the nick of time. Great sparks and even flaming branches were raining down upon it. The smoke was stifling.

Huddled under some kind of an old canvas,— a tent cloth from some workman's camp on the gravel road, perhaps, Mrs. Anderson and the little girl were trying to escape the smoke and terrific heat. The grass all about the clearing was on fire. The little house must go, when the main body of the flames came closer, and very doubtful did it look that life itself could be saved in so exposed a place.

With a cry, "You can never come through the fire if you stay here, people! We've come for you in the car! The lake! It's the only chance of escape!" Phil made his presence known.

The roar and crackle and all the dreadful noise of the ocean of flame that, as far as eye could see, flooded the woods to the west seemed quite to drown the boy's loud shout.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST RUN OF THE BELOVED THIRTY

A second time Phil loudly called and now an answer showed Nels Anderson and the golfing man to be near the edge of the woods. They had completed the burning of a wide strip of the dry grass completely around the clearing, only to find their work useless. All hope of thus stopping the spread of the fire toward the buildings was destroyed by the falling embers. The wind carried them everywhere.

There was no time to lose. The danger of death from suffocation, even if the flames could be escaped, was very great. Now the roof of the house was on fire. There was not a barrel of water within miles. Further fighting, further loss of time, would be folly. Giants of the forest were flaming up from roots to topmost branch not twenty yards within the woods. The

whole roadway would be ablaze, on both sides, in a few minutes.

A most pitiable object was Anderson's poor cow. Her head to the ground as if to escape the smoke, a low, frightened bellowing told of her realization of the danger. Forgetful of herself the child was saying, "Oh, poor, good bossy! Oh, poor bossy!"

The small haystack along side the crude, log barn suddenly blazed up. The dull red glow gave place to a white light all through the clearing. It was impossible now that any part of the property could be saved. Anderson and the other man came running to the car.

"It will be a close shave! Can you make it, boys?" cried the one in the golf cap, above the roar of the flames.

"You bet! Be at the lake in no time! We've often carried more'n six," yelled Paul excitedly. "Right in here!" and he held the tonneau door open wide. "You in front with Phil, Mr. Anderson!"

Even as Jones followed Mrs. Anderson, the little girl and the golfing man into the tonneau, and slammed the door behind him, the Thirty was under way. Its staunch gears were never before so quickly shifted from low to high. What mattered it if Paul did sit down hard in the strange man's lap? What mattered it if poor Nels, unused to automobiles, was jerked nearly from his seat before he got his great, clumsy legs quite inside? The raging sea of fire was bordering the trail ahead, and hundreds of little tongues of flames leaped here and there in the parched, dry grass and weeds in the road itself.

With frightened, staring eyes Paul looked with wonder upon the dreadful flames leaping from one treetop to another. The man beside him was shielding his face from the terrible glare and heat and the woman and little girl clung tightly to each other, the former watching only the child and holding a hand to protect her face. As if dazed and unable to comprehend,

Nels Anderson looked always back toward the doomed clearing.

Phil Way alone watched the road ahead. With firm set jaw and straining eyes he looked ever forward through the blinding glare and the billows of smoke that now and again concealed the trail completely. But his hands gripped the wheel with perfect confidence, his foot pressed the accelerator steadily. The gallant car responded. The ground seemed speeding from under its wheels. On and on it flew.

Thus far the fire had raged to the west of the road only. In but a few places had it reached the trees directly beside the trail, pausing there till some fresh gust of wind, or shower of sparks, carried it to the other side.

But now Phil saw before him a spot where on both sides of the road the forest was a flaming furnace. He did not falter. On flew the car. Another moment and it was in the midst of the fire. A hundred yards it ran through the deadly heat, the awful roar and sheets of

flame leaping upward and outward till their fiery fingers were all but seizing the brave lad and his passengers.

Safely the Thirty ran the fearful gauntlet. There came a shout of praise and admiration from the golfing man, words of thanksgiving from the woman. The worst was over.

Rapidly, but not so fast as in the direct course of the wind, the fire was reaching out toward Opal Lake. Like a galloping army it came on behind the car, but, barring accident, could never, would never, overtake the swift machine.

Barring accident! Bravely the engine, clutch, gears, springs, axles and wheels had withstood the strain of the terrific speed, the heavy load and the wretched road. Bravely, with every charge of gas, each cylinder delivered generous power.

The car shot down the grade into the small valley where, some distance below, the gravel road came to its abrupt ending. There was a

heavy jolt as the front wheels struck the dry bed of the shallow stream.

Anderson, the giant, pitched forward. He might have caught and righted himself quite readily had he had complete use of his hands and arms, long since partially paralyzed; but in his disabled condition he missed the windshield frame he tried to catch, and went partly overboard.

With his left hand Phil Way reached for his falling passenger, still holding the wheel with his right. He seized poor Anderson just in time, but the great bulk of the fellow drew him partly from his own seat, and pulled the steering wheel sharply round.

Still going at speed, though now on the upward grade, the automobile answered instantly to the call of the steering knuckles—true to its mechanism, perfectly, to the last—answered to the driver's unintended command, and sharply swerved to the right. A large pine stood in its course.

So quickly did the collision occur, so unprepared were any of the automobile's occupants to meet the terrible shock that the escape of all from serious injury was truly miraculous. The outcome must surely have been far worse had the tree been struck squarely head-on. The fact of the fender and right front tire and wheel receiving the heaviest force of the impact lessened the jar, and the car swung around spending broken momentum in the dishing of both rear wheels.

Nels Anderson, pitched far out on the ground, was gathered up cut and bleeding. Mrs. Anderson and the child were bruised but not much hurt. Phil, Paul and the golfing man suffered no injuries beyond the nervous shock.

Strange as it may seem, Paul Jones spoke not a word. Questioningly he looked at Way.

Phil had been first to help Anderson to his feet. Now leaving him to the care of the others he quickly inspected the damage done to the machine. The roar of the flames was still just

behind. Their blood-red glare cast a twilight glow far ahead through the darkness of the woods.

“She was a mighty good car,” said Phil Way, softly, as if to himself, quite as one might speak of some friend who has gone. “A mighty good car!” but at the same moment his gaze took in the flames fast following along the ground and from tree to tree both west and south. Even here the heat and smoke were terrible. The dull red light was everywhere. The very sky seemed ablaze.

“This is most unfortunate. I’m truly sorry for this, boys,” spoke the golfing man, very soberly. He too had been hastily investigating the damage.

Though his voice was kind, the speaker irritated Paul Jones exceedingly. “Wouldn’t have happened but for you, and except to send you to prison you aren’t worth it, I can tell you that, Mr. Grandall,” were the words he thought, but did not utter.

“Might have been worse! We’re still a mile from the lake and the fire’s just behind us! That’s the whole answer,” said Phil rapidly. His words were in reply to the stranger’s sympathetic expression, but were equally addressed to all. “Right ahead on this trail, then! We’ve a raft that will hold everyone!”

Rapid movement was necessary. The wind was blowing furiously now. No power on earth could stay the flames that swept ever forward. Their path grew constantly wider.

Both Phil and Paul looked with astonishment to see the stranger, whom they now detested more than ever, seize Anderson’s little girl in his arms to carry her; but they were all hastening forward through the crimson light, and clouds of smoke. No more than a glance could the boys exchange.

Many times the two lads looked back. It was fortunate, perhaps, that the rise of the ground soon shut off their view of the prized Thirty. The hungry, sweeping flames came curling, play-

ing, leaping, dancing, roaring on. They reached the car.

Phil remembered, long afterward, that as he stepped out of the automobile for the last time he noticed the speedometer, twisted about so that the light of a lamp shattered and broken, but still burning fell upon it. The reading was 5,599 miles—the record of the season.

Safely ahead of the fire the fleeing refugees reached Opal Lake. With a glad shout, though their faces showed deepest anxiety and fear, Billy Worth and Chip Slider received them.

“The raft’s all ready! I’ve made it big enough to float a house! All our provisions are on board, too!” said Billy to Phil, the moment he ran up. “Where’s the car?”

A few words told the story. There was no comment beyond the quick, “Oh! what an escape!”

The snaky tongues of fire coming on swift, almost, as the wind itself, were but two hundred yards away when the rescuers and rescued em-

barked upon the raft. Boxes and camp equipage afforded seats. Billy had trimmed a couple of extra long poles with which to move the clumsy craft, and present safety for all was assured.

The dawn was just breaking. Once out on the water the coming daylight was quite clear despite the smoke that in vast clouds rolled swiftly over, whipped and torn by the wind.

"Thank goodness there's no fire to the north—not yet anyway," said Phil rubbing his face, grimy with smoke and ashes. He was thinking of MacLester and for the information of the Andersons briefly told of Dave's unaccountable disappearance.

"There's a long stretch of pine on the other side," said the stranger, still wearing his golfing cap, by the way. "There are a couple of streams there, though, both of them flowing into the lower end of the lake. If your friend is lost and should remember that, he could

follow either one of them and not come out wrong."

Dave was more than merely lost, Paul thought and said so. And, "You know this country pretty well," he added, addressing the former speaker. "You belonged to the Longknives," he went on rather tartly. "It will be the last of the old clubhouse."

"Yes, one blot will be wiped out. It is only too bad that so much that is good must go with it."

Paul glanced at Phil and his eyes also met Billy's. The man's words were puzzling.

"We saw—" Paul began, but a shout interrupted him —

"*There's Dave! There's Dave now* and some man with him!" yelled Chip Slider suddenly. His voice was like a burst of ecstasy. His eyes scanning the distant shore, he had instantly caught sight of the two hats waved as a signal.

The joy of the three chums, that the fourth member of their almost inseparable quartette

was safe and sound, it would take pages to describe. With the most delighted waving of his own hat, Phil shouted to MacLester about the skiff still moored on the north shore. His voice was lost in the roar of the wind and the flames now sweeping very near the water's edge. By signals, however, he quickly made Dave understand and the latter and the man with him were seen to hurry forward to where the boat was tied.

All the time the golfing man watched MacLester and the person with him keenly. "Impossible!" he muttered at last. "I thought for a moment I knew the old chap your friend seems to have in tow."

But it was not impossible, apparently, for even before MacLester and his chums could exchange greetings, as the skiff drew near, the small, elderly man in the stern of the boat cried: "Oh! 'tis there ye air then, Mr. Beckley! Oh, ho! hurray! I dunno!" A laugh that was equally like a sob accompanied the words,

and "Oh, ho! oh, ho! I dunno!" the old fellow cried again and again.

"It's 'Daddy' O'Lear, right from my own home," the golfing man explained briefly.

The three boys again exchanged quick glances. Instantly as he heard the name "Beckley" Phil had remembered the initial B on the shaving cup found in the clubhouse. Was the man trying to carry on a deception even as to his name, and at such a time, his thoughts inquired. No, he quickly decided, there was some mistake.

"I do hope it may be no bad news he may be sent with, Meester Beckley," said Mrs. Anderson. She had been sitting silent on one of the boxes Billy provided, the little girl leaning on her knees. All the Andersons had watched the fire constantly, their heavy hearts revealed in their sad faces.

"I—I think not," spoke the man in a puzzled way, glancing toward the fire now almost bursting through the shore line.

"It will be hot here, and dangerous," said

Phil, looking in the same direction. "We must shove down the lake. Our poles won't reach to go out farther. The water's too deep. We'll lie off opposite the marsh near the Point."

Shouting to the approaching boat to follow, Way and Billy slowly pushed their heavy craft to the west. The skiff overtook them easily and quickly.

"Hello!" grinned Paul Jones as Dave faced quickly about when the boat came alongside. But his half jocular tone fell on ears attuned to serious matters.

"Oh! this is a terrible thing," said Mac-Lester, his eyes fixed on the flood of flames.

"I was never so glad as I am this minute! What in the world happened to you, Dave? But never mind; you're safe now," Way answered with emphasis.

Somehow all felt it was no time for conversation. Dave made no response to Phil's question. But Billy Worth—Chef Billy—remembered one thing.

"Have you had anything to eat?" he demanded. "I'll bet you haven't!"

"Mighty little—either of us," was the answer. "We were lost,—just about."

"Here's something!" and Worth drew a basket out from beneath a blanket. "Guess we'll all feel better for a bite of breakfast," he added.

Crackers, cheese, bread and butter and bananas were in the "ship's stores," as Billy expressed it, and there was enough for all.

The simple matter of eating served not only to relieve hunger but gave all present a sense of better acquaintance and far greater freedom in talking with one another.

"'Tis an awful waste of wood, sure!" said Mr. O'Lear.

Obviously he referred to the fire. The flames now swept the shore line from the Point to the lake's eastern boundary. For miles upon miles the forest was a whirlwind of furiously roaring flames, or a desolate waste of blazing

wreckage, smoldering stumps and blackened, leafless tree trunks, their naked arms still glowing red as the wind fanned them.

"The clubhouse! The roof has caught!" cried Billy Worth suddenly. "And look! It's a man!—two men, on the porch roof!" he yelled.

All eyes turned instantly toward the Point. It was the only place on the south shore where the fire had not yet come to the water's edge. But this would be true scarcely one minute longer. The clubhouse was blazing furiously. The trees beside it threw off vast clouds of mingled black and red—of fearful smoke and flame.

"Great heavens! it's Lew Grandall!" cried the stranger on the raft. "And the other man! They're fighting!"

"It's Murky! The other one is Murky!" Paul's sharp voice fairly shrieked. "It's the suit-case! They have the suit-case! Murky's trying to get it away from him!"

"Oo—h-o there!" shouted the golfing man

with all his force. "Get to the ground! The fire's all around you! Get into the lake quick or you're dead men!"

For an instant the two who fiercely struggled on the small balcony seemed to answer to the voice. Grandall would have leaped, it was apparent, but the other seized him furiously, and drew him forcibly back. Then a thick burst of smoke concealed them both.

CHAPTER XXIV

SETTING WRONG THINGS RIGHT

Wearily had Lewis Grandall lain himself down to sleep in his hot, close room. It was his last night in the old clubhouse. He might have been quite comfortable, so far as his physical self was concerned, had he been willing to open the door-like window that led to the small balcony and admit the air; but this he feared to do.

Some sense of danger, a feeling of some dreadful peril impending, harassed him. He tried to reason it all out of his mind. He had not felt so before having actually in his possession the moldy, discolored leather suit-case, he reflected. Why should it make a difference?

There was no good cause for its doing so, he told himself, and resolved to think of other things. But always his thoughts came back

to the one point—some great peril close before him. What was it? He could not fathom the distress of his own mind.

Often as Grandall tried wearily to forget, to turn and sleep, some lines of a tale he had somewhere heard or read,—a pirate's song you'll recognize as being in a book of Stevenson's—struck into his mind. It was as if someone sang or called aloud to him:—

“Fifteen men on the dead man's chest!

Yo-ho-ho! And a bottle of rum!”

In vain he told himself that it was nothing—nothing! That he must not let himself fall a prey to such silly dread, an unidentified fear, like a child afraid in the dark. But ever the sense of peril oppressed him. Ever there came to his haunted thoughts—

“Fifteen men on the dead man's chest!

Yo-ho-ho! And a bottle of rum!”

At last he rose and sat a long time on the edge of the bed. Then he dressed himself. For a great while, as the night crept slowly on, he

sat thus fully clothed. He did not know why he did this. The fear of some unknown, threatening thing was not removed or altered. The ringing in his brain—

“Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest!”
was just as it had been before.

He lighted a match and looked at his watch. Four o’clock. Soon it would be daylight. Then he would go—leave this terrible place forever! Leave everything he hated—and that was all persons and all things. Leave the guilt he vowed he would never face—if he could. So thinking, he lay down once more and sheer exhaustion let the wretched man sink into heavy slumber.

Lynx-eyed, the scowling Murky waited. The black shadows of the thick shrubbery near the clubhouse door concealed him. A long, long time passed. It was quite evident, the tramp reflected, that the man with the suit-case had gone to bed.

Should he break in on him? Break in the

house, slip up to his bed, strike one swift blow and end the whole search for that twenty thousand dollars quickly? End it all so quietly that the one who had played him false would never be conscious of the outcome?

No, that was not the plan Murky chose to follow. It might result in his obtaining the prize he sought, but he desired more. He wanted revenge. He wanted Grandall to know, too, that he *was* avenged,—would have him fully realize that it was Murky,—Murky whom he had tricked and deceived, that had found him out and vanquished him at last.

Daylight was necessary to the tramp's plan. He wanted Grandall to see and recognize him. He pictured in his mind how, when suddenly awakened, the trickster should find looking down into his face a pair of eyes that were sharper and just as unmerciful as his own. Then he would speak, make sure he was known—strike quickly and effectively, and be gone.

He would not commit murder—unless obliged

to do so; it might make trouble. But he would leave Grandall so hopelessly senseless that there would be no possibility of early pursuit from that quarter, as there would probably be none from any other.

Oh, they were black, black thoughts that coursed in Murky's mind!—hardly the thoughts that should come to a man in his last night on earth. But they were very pleasing to the tramp. With a kind of wild, wolfish relish, he pondered over the details of his plan.

Satisfied that Grandall would not leave the clubhouse before morning, confident of his own ability to awaken at the slightest sound of footsteps near, and resolving to be astir before daybreak, anyway, if he were not disturbed earlier, which he regarded as quite improbable, the scowling wretch allowed his eyes to close.

Even in sleep Murky's face bore an expression little short of fiendish. He was lying quite under the thick foliage of the bushes. They screened him from view and from the

breeze that had sprung up out of the west. But also they screened from his eyes the glow that now lit up the heavens, in the distance, for miles around.

It was the smoke, strong in his nostrils, that at last startled the fellow into sudden wakefulness. He had been too long a woodsman, had had too thorough a knowledge of the great forests in his earlier, better days, not to know instantly what it meant. He sprang up and looked about. The course of the wind was such, he reasoned, that the fire would not reach this particular vicinity. But what if it should? Why, so much the better, he reflected. The clubhouse would burn. If Grandall, dead or unconscious, burned with it—Murky's smile was hideous.

For some time he watched the progress of the fire, yet in the distance. But presently he became aware that the daylight was near. It was time for him to act.

Stealthily Murky crept to the broken window

at the west side of the clubhouse and entered. He knew the first floor doors were locked, but he did not know that Grandall had secured his bedroom door. This he discovered in due time. Just outside the room he listened. Sounds of heavy breathing assured him his victim slept.

It took a good while for Murky's heavy knife to cut in a panel of the pine door a hole large enough to permit him to reach in and turn the key; for he worked very slowly, very quietly. The daylight was coming in at the window of the narrow hallway when his task was done—the daylight, the dull glare of the advancing flames and the sound of their roar and fury.

The door creaked slightly as ever so slowly its hinges were moved, but in another second Murky stood inside.

The man on the bed awoke—leaped to his feet—saw—recognized—gave forth a yell the like of which even the wildest places have seldom heard.

Instantly Grandall knew his danger. Seiz-

ing the leather case, for whose stolen contents he had risked so much, he threw open the balcony window. In another moment he would have leaped to the ground below but Murky caught him and they grappled.

It was in the midst of this first fierce struggle that the two were seen by those on the raft. Murky's greater strength was fast overpowering the other's soft muscles. Grandall breathed in choking gasps.

Then came the shouted warning from the lake. For an instant the surprise of it caused the tramp to relax his hold, but only for an instant.

"Blame *me!*" like some wild beast he growled, though there was savage delight in his tones as well, "Blame *me!* but I'd as soon leave my bones here as anywhere, to see you get what's comin' to ye, you lyin' skunk!" He fairly hissed the epithet in Grandall's ear.

It was at this juncture that Murky first drew his panting adversary back into the flaming

clubhouse. Grandall knew he was no match for his enemy in strength.

"Wait, you fool!" he gasped. "There's a fortune for you—ease—luxury! Take it! I'll add as much more to it!"

As the lying wretch hoped, Murky's wild thoughts were for the moment attracted by the words. His grip upon Grandall's great, fat neck was weakened. Like lightning and with a vicious curse the latter threw him off, put forth all his strength and hurled the tramp to the floor.

For himself there was aid in sight, was Grandall's thought. If he could escape to the water below, he could make some explanation to those on the raft, whoever they might be. They would save him from the fire and from Murky, whom he feared still more.

Far more quickly than you read the words, the idea flashed in the mind of the frightened scoundrel. The instant he freed himself he

leaped again through the window. With the yell of an enraged maniac Murky followed.

The Auto Boys and their companions on the great raft, floating but a few hundred feet from shore, saw Grandall reappear. With horrified faces they saw about him the smoke and flame that now raged in the roof above, and throughout the whole lower floor of the clubhouse, below the balcony,—saw him seize the leather case and pitch it far forward to the water's edge—saw him glance down as if, in desperation, to leap.

Again a blood-thirsty savage scream sounded above the fury of the fire and wind, and Murky also appeared on the flame-shrouded balcony.

Grandall was too late. No more than a child could he cope with the mad strength of his assailant. Like a great bag of meal, or other heavy, limp and lifeless thing he was dragged in through the open, blazing window. A fiendish but triumphant yell once more came out of the leaping smoke and flame. It was the voice

of the infuriated tramp, to be heard on earth again, no more forever.

Dazed, powerless, speechless, those on the lake helplessly witnessed the awful tragedy. With straining eyes and ears they watched and listened; but there came now no sound above the fitful roar and crackle of the fire and the surging wind.

Within a minute the roof of the clubhouse went down. The whole interior of the building followed, and where had stood the old house on the Point there remained only the walls of flaming logs, the mass of debris and the wreckage of wrecked lives that rapidly burned within them.

“You know what’s in that bag he threw down to the water?” the golfing man asked. It was in the midst of the exclamation and words of awe of those who saw the terrible scene enacted, that the question was asked of Anderson. The Swede nodded.

"And you?" said the stranger, turning to Phil as spokesman for the boys.

"Yes, we know. We know the whole story. We—we thought *you* were—We saw you about the clubhouse and we got it into our heads that *you* were—Was it really Grandall that we saw on the balcony?"

"Thought *I* was Grandall?" muttered the man, mystified. "Why should you? Did you know he was in the woods? For I did not. But it was Lewis Grandall and no other that went to his death before our very eyes! The man with him—Murky was the name you used? Who was he?"

"Then you don't *know* the *whole story* of the robbery?" exclaimed Billy Worth. "Murky was the man Grandall got to go through the motions of robbing him of the twenty thousand dollars in the first place!"

It was with great interest, indeed, that Mr. Beckley heard the complete account of Grandall's double-dealing scheme as Chip Slider and

the Auto Boys had gathered the information.

Meanwhile there had come with the wind fitful dashes of rain that soon settled itself to a steady downpour. The forest fire had nearly burned itself out on the lake's south shore. Thousands of acres of smoldering ruins lay in its wake. Yet for a long time the refugees huddled upon the raft, protecting themselves from the storm as best they could with blankets and bedding. Not yet was it safe to venture ashore.

It was during this period that the golfing man made known his own identity and told why he happened to be hiding in the old clubhouse, resulting quite naturally, he freely admitted, in his being taken for the fugitive treasurer of the Longknives.

His name was Henry Beckley, he explained, and he had been one of the most active members of the Longknives Club. He had never been quite satisfied that the club's treasurer was really robbed of the money intended for the

road builders, but had never found any genuine evidence to the contrary.

A long time had passed since the loss of the money. The investigation of Grandall's crookedness, at home, was taken up by the Grand Jury. Mr. Beckley had reason to suspect the man of a number of dishonest practices, but feared for the safety of the bank, in which he was heavily interested, if the public suddenly learned that Grandall was a thief.

To avoid being called as a witness in the matter he decided to go away until the investigation was over. He would keep his going and his destination a secret from all, his own family excepted, he planned, and with no one suspecting where he might be, visit Opal Lake. Living in concealment at the clubhouse he would have an opportunity of investigating his suspicion that Grandall had made up the robbery story. Also he would satisfy himself, at least, that Nels Anderson had had no part in the disap-

pearance of the payroll money and settle, for all time, occasional rumors to the contrary.

Mr. Beckley had reached the lake only a day or two before the Auto Boys set up their camp there. He avoided them for he wished to work in secret. Also, for fear other strangers, or even some who might know him, should chance to visit the lake, he was careful not to disturb the deserted appearance of the clubhouse. He burned no light at night, and rarely sat anywhere but in his bedroom.

"You had a light there one night," spoke Paul. "We saw it flicker for just a second once, then after while saw the same thing again."

"It must have been matches to light my cigar that you saw," Mr. Beckley replied. "I knew you had discovered me and that in part was one reason that I went to Anderson's to stay. He brought me some provisions one evening and I agreed then to go to his house, and I did so within a day or two."

Paul could have said "Yes, *I* knew he came to see you," if he had wished. But he was silent.

But MacLester spoke up: "And you went down on the old pier and threw something into the water the last thing before leaving. We saw that, too!"

"Yes, you're right. All the scraps of my lunches and the like I tied up and, putting a stone in the package to sink it to the bottom of the lake, I threw it in. You must have had pretty sharp eyes for the Point," the speaker added, pleasantly. "But it is no wonder. I would have been even more interested in my own investigations than I was had I known half as much of the true story of the Grandall robbery as you boys knew. And had I known of that awful Murky being around I'd most certainly have gone to stay with good old Nels Anderson much sooner than I did."

"Sure, I am worried sick to know what ever I would ha' done, a gettin to the hoose an' not

findin' of ye there," put in Daddy O'Lear with a sorrowful shake of his head.

Mr. Beckley's faithful follower had already given that gentleman and MacLester an account of his adventures ending in his sudden appearance on the north shore, as the three sat by themselves in the boat some time earlier. Now the story was repeated for the information of all.

Mrs. Beckley, it appeared, having learned of the flight of Grandall wished her husband to be informed of this development. He had cautioned her that he could receive no letters without revealing where he was, and she could not write or telegraph. So with many instructions as to secrecy she sent the old family gardner, Daddy O'Lear, to tell all that had occurred.

The well-meaning old fellow left the train at a town to the north of Opal Lake, as told to do. He became quite confused and lost in the woods as he sought the clubhouse, and when he chanced to learn from MacLester that he had actually

reached Opal Lake, though quite without knowing it, he was greatly alarmed. He feared the nature of his errand would be discovered by the young campers.

On the pretext of going for his baggage he walked back into the forest, MacLester accompanying him, instead of crossing over to the boys' camp. He wanted to gain time to think and plan. He finally decided that, a long way into the woods, he would give MacLester the slip and later reach the clubhouse and Mr. Beckley secretly, by walking around the lake to the other side.

This plan might have been more successful had "Daddy" not lost himself more hopelessly than ever, before he was ready to put it into execution. And if it had not been for Dave serving as his guide, at last, the good-natured Irishman never would have found his way to the lake again at all. This he freely admitted.

"I was satisfied that the stream we found must lead to the lake, or to some larger stream

that would do so," MacLester explained. "We were a long time getting here, but when I saw the fire burning so terribly I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry we had saved ourselves. Then I saw the raft, and—*believe me!*"

Very soon after reaching his friends MacLester had learned of the loss of the automobile. Naturally thoughts of the car were in the mind of every one of the boys, even in the midst of all they had lately passed through. But no word of complaint or grief was spoken. Possibly Mr. Beckley noticed this for his own thoughts were not idle.

The rain still fell in torrents, hissing and steaming in the smoldering ruins of the great fire. But the heat was almost gone now. The shore could be approached without inconvenience. Mentioning this, the golfing man suggested that it would now be possible to see if the general suspicion concerning the suit-case Grandall had thrown to the water's edge was correct.

The skiff was moored to the raft. Dave and Phil entered the boat and rowed up past the rotting and now half burned timbers of the old pier. The leather case had fallen partially into the water they saw, but quickly they recovered it.

“In spite of what has happened to this money, and we all know the terrible history now—I suppose we must agree that this bag and its contents are still the property of the Longknives Club,” said Mr. Beckley solemnly. For, unopened, Phil had passed the discolored case at once to him. “At any rate,” the speaker went on, very soberly, “we will see what is in it. I have a few things in mind regarding the club’s disposition of this matter.”

Without hesitation Mr. Beckley, finding the case locked, cut into the leather with his knife. The packages of bills, the sack of gold and silver coin, were quite unharmed, though damp and stained by their long concealment.

The complete exhaustion of all the raft’s

passengers, wet and hungry, but glad and thankful for their preservation, led them to seek the shore as soon as they felt it at all safe to do so. They landed at the site of the boy's camp. Their shack lay in ashes, but a rude shelter was erected and a meal of roasted potatoes and hot coffee prepared.

It was then near nightfall. The decision was reached that no effort to get to Staretta should be made until morning. Plans to let all sleep as comfortably as possible were in progress.

Suddenly, out of the still smoking wilderness, there came a loud shout. Link Fraley, his shapeless old hat pulled down almost over his eyes, his horses and wagon steaming wet and coated with wet ashes, drove up at a trot.

"All Staretta's been worried about the Andersons and the Auto Boys," he cried. "Worried some myself! Worried some myself, about you all," he repeated jovially.

Needless to say good, clean Staretta beds were occupied by the Andersons, the Auto Boys,

the golfing man, his faithful servant and Chip Slider that night. Nearly all the town's population had met them on their arrival in Fraley's wagon. Needless to say, too, the story they had been able to tell Link was repeated by him many, many times to others. For days it was the talk of the village.

The day following the fire Mr. Beckley confirmed by telegraph the hearty acquiescence of the Longknives Club's officers in a plan he had formulated for the disposition of the stolen twenty thousand dollars. This was the thought to which he referred while on the raft, and about which I have yet to tell you.

First, there must be medical aid for Nels Anderson's disability and a restoration of the money losses he had personally suffered in the building of the gravel road.

Next those workmen who had been employed on the road, that could still be found, must receive the money due them.

Third, a new automobile should be provided

for the Auto Boys. It certainly was due them. Except for their bravery and devotion to duty, the tragedy making up the last chapter of the gravel road's history would have been far, far more terrible.

It was not long until all Mr. Beckley's plans were carried out. Legally the Longknives Club had never been disbanded and the funds were unanimously voted as he proposed.

But how about poor Chip Slider?

There is today no more contented boy in Lannington, the home city of the Auto Boys, than he.

Without loss of time the chums returned home, taking Chip with them. He's working for Con Cecil in a newspaper office there and going to night school. All his questioning if peace and plenty might not be found somewhere, sometime, has been most pleasingly answered.

There were gladness and thanksgiving in the

homes of all the boys' families when the telegrams telling of their escape from the great forest fire were received. A most happy homecoming it was for all, a day or so later.

Scarcely a week had passed when Henry Beckley and a committee of Longknives drove up to the green and yellow garage the Auto Boys called their own, and there delivered a truly splendid, new car.

On part of the boys' families and their friends there was much ado about it all. A dinner by the Lannington Automobile Club, and a great many more fine speeches than the four chums relished hearing about themselves, was one such thing.

"And I will venture to say," spoke Mr. Beckley, in the course of his after dinner address, on this occasion, "that whatever the future has in store for our friends, they will be found active and alert in time of play, in time of work or in time of danger."

“The Auto Boys’ Big Six,” a book wherein the later experiences of the chums will be reported, should in due time enable you to judge whether Mr. Beckley was correct.

THE END.

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By James A. Braden

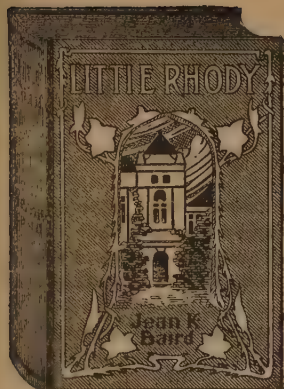
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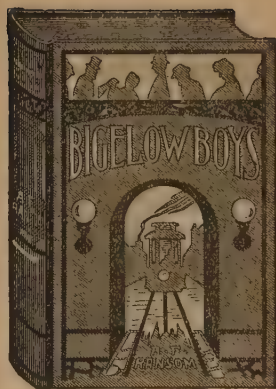
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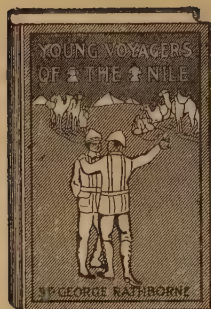
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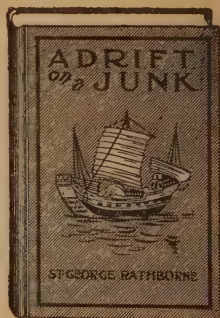
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